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DEVELOPING A SERMON APPLICATION GROUP AT  
DUNDALK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
DUNDALK, MARYLAND

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Anthony Robert Reid  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

DEVELOPING A SERMON APPLICATION GROUP AT  
DUNDALK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
DUNDALK, MARYLAND

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To Amy,  
my best friend,  
and the love of my life

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## PREFACE

The idea for this project was inspired by my desire to fulfill the teaching aspect of Jesus' command given in Matthew 28:19-20. In these verses, Jesus commands his ministers to make disciples and, as part of that process, Jesus instructed them to teach his followers to obey everything he had commanded.

My desire to be faithful to Jesus' command in my own ministry, gave rise to the idea of developing a sermon application group at my local church in Dundalk, Maryland. It was that idea that opened my eyes to the possibility of using the group as a model for long-term discipleship training. It was this possibility that ultimately led to my choice of a sermon application group for my Doctor of Ministry project.

I am indebted to my wife, Amy, for encouraging me to finish this work. I had actually "quit" the Doctor of Ministry program on more than one occasion, and it was only through Amy's constant encouragement that I was able to complete the work and finish the program. I owe her more than she knows.

I would also like to thank the 12 members of Dundalk Presbyterian Church who were eager to assist their new pastor in his "doctoral" work. I could not have done the project without them.

Finally, I would like to thank my office secretary, Mrs. Jean Pavlosky, for guarding my time while I wrote the manuscript.

Anthony R. Reid

Dundalk, Maryland

March 2014

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to organize select members of Dundalk Presbyterian Church of Dundalk, Maryland, into a sermon application group and to use this group as a model for the church's future discipleship training program.

**Goals**

The project had three goals. The first goal was to help members of the sermon application group improve their ability to apply sermon content to their various life situations. The method for accomplishing this goal was to offer the group's participants a small group venue in which to reflect on and discuss possible ways they could apply the biblical principles from the sermons they heard to their unique life situations.

To measure the success of this goal, each participant received a pre-series and post-series survey designed to elicit the necessary data which would measure whether or not the participants had improved their ability to apply sermon content to their lives. The indicator of success for this goal would be a positive change in at least 50 percent of participant responses between the pre- and post-project surveys.

The second goal of the project was to provide practical training for future sermon application group leaders. Since the intent of the project was to determine whether or not sermon application groups would become the model for discipleship training at Dundalk Presbyterian Church (DPC), it was necessary to develop leaders who

could lead these groups in the future. The method for accomplishing this goal was to enlist two committed church members into the group who were already serving as lay-leaders and holding teaching positions within the church. During the course of the project these leaders were given three opportunities to observe how I led the sermon application group, to ask questions, and to discuss possible group leadership strategies with me. Then both leaders took four turns each leading the group's weekly discussions while I supervised.

To measure the success of this goal, when each leader had completed his four turns leading the group, the project's participants filled out a Leadership Evaluation Form for that leader. At the end of each session, I met with the leader, offered my observations and discussed various ways he could improve his leadership of the group the next time he led the discussion. At the end of the project I assessed each leader's evaluation forms in order to determine whether or not that leader would be a viable candidate to lead one of the church's future sermon application groups. The indicator of success for this goal was that, by the end of the project, at least one of the two leaders would receive a positive evaluation from a minimum of 50 percent of the group's participants.

The third goal of the project was to determine the viability of using sermon application groups as the church's primary discipleship training program. This goal was the heart of the project and ultimately determined the direction of discipleship training at DPC. The method for accomplishing this goal was to offer each of the group's members a post-project survey which would indicate whether or not he or she would be willing to participate in future sermon application groups.

To measure the success of this goal, if more than 50 percent of the participants indicated a willingness to continue in future groups, then these groups would become the

discipleship training program for the church. If, however, less than 50 percent indicated a willingness to participate, I would have to revisit and reformulate the design and methodology of the church's discipleship training program.

### **Ministry Context**

Dundalk Presbyterian Church is located in the city of Dundalk, Maryland. Dundalk is an economically depressed suburb located to the southeast of the city of Baltimore.<sup>1</sup> The church is a small, declining, predominately blue-collar congregation that is struggling not only to grow but also to find ways to maintain its current attendance. Between 2009 and 2012, the average attendance at the church's Sunday morning services dwindled from approximately 280 to approximately 110 persons. The decline was the result of two factors. First, the church's pastor resigned in December 2011 and the congregation was leaderless until the pastoral search committee selected me as its pastor in October 2012. It was during that ten month interval that approximately 70 of the church's members left DPC presumably in search of other churches.

According to conversations with DPC's elders and staff, the previous pastor's resignation was the likely cause of a large percentage of attendees leaving the church. The elders and staff did, however, point to a second factor which they believed could have contributed to an even larger percentage of lost members. They informed me that there was virtually no discipleship training taking place at the church in the months prior to my arrival. For example, with the exception of a sparsely attended adult and children's Sunday school, and a vigorous but small youth group—both of which met once per

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<sup>1</sup>“A Brief History of Dundalk and the Patapsco Neck Area,” accessed September 18, 2012, [http://dundalkchamberofcommerce.org/dundalk\\_md\\_info.html](http://dundalkchamberofcommerce.org/dundalk_md_info.html).

week—there was virtually no discipleship training taking place at the church. It became apparent, therefore, that prior to my arrival, the church had been putting forth very little effort at discipleship training. The elders also informed me that one of the unfortunate results of this lack of training was that over the course of less than three years, more than 150 of the church’s members had left the congregation and they suspected that many did so in search of discipleship training elsewhere.

Not only had the lack of discipleship training affected the church’s attendance, it had another detrimental effect as well. Since the church’s leadership had failed to provide appropriate discipleship training, this failure led to an observably weakened theological and doctrinal foundation among many of the church’s members. In discussions with the church’s lay leadership, I became aware of several church members who could not satisfactorily explain who Jesus is or why God the Father had to send him from heaven to die on the cross.

One solution to this problem was to plan and implement a discipleship training program that would meet the practical, spiritual, and intellectual needs of this small blue-collar congregation. In my mind, the right kind of program would go a long way in remedying the church’s situation by meeting two essential needs. First, the right kind of discipleship training would help keep the remaining members of the congregation from leaving the church in search of discipleship training elsewhere. And, second, the training program would offer a significant solution to the doctrinal immaturity among the church’s current membership. Therefore, when I took the call to pastor DPC, I made it a priority to formulate and implement a discipleship training program that would help correct those two deficiencies. It was the search for such a program that ultimately generated the idea for this project.

## Rationale

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>2</sup> In verse 18, Jesus indicated that his authority was the basis for making disciples and the rest of the passage is a broad statement of how he expected his ministers to do it.

First, since Jesus had “all authority in heaven and on earth,” he did not merely suggest but rather commanded that his ministers make disciples. According to William Hendriksen, this is not the same as commanding them to make *converts*, although, he says, the latter is implied.<sup>3</sup> The phrase “make disciples” stresses the fact that “the mind, as well as the heart and will, must be won for God.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the main idea behind making disciples was that after conversion those disciples would become skilled students of Jesus’ teaching. The fact that disciples must be trained to observe what Jesus had commanded, reveals the failure on the part of DPC’s previous leadership to fulfill what Jesus had commanded.

In addition to his command to make disciples, Jesus also declared how he expected his ministers to perform the task. He said they were to baptize his disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all his commands.

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<sup>2</sup>Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup>William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, New Testament Commentary, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 999.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

When ministers consider Jesus' command, it is not the *going* or the *baptizing* that is intimidating, rather, it is the phrase "teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." Meditating on that task is almost overwhelming. But what can be even more intimidating is that Jesus indicated an expectation that his ministers would do whatever was necessary to ensure that his disciples did, in fact, observe his commands.

The idea of ensuring that disciples observe what Jesus commanded necessitates the search for a discipleship training program that revolves around practical application. According to John MacArthur, "Disciples are people who believe, whose faith motivates them to obey all Jesus commanded."<sup>5</sup> The idea of developing the kind of training that helps disciples observe (or obey) what Jesus commanded ought to motivate ministers to seek effective ways to fulfill this aspect of their ministry.

The main reason for conducting this project was to correct the most glaringly deficient issue at DPC. The failure of the church to meet Jesus' expectation made it necessary to establish a practical and sustainable program that met the discipleship training needs of DPC's congregation. And while there are many legitimate and helpful discipleship training models to choose from, a sermon-based application group seemed to be the most viable program for this particular church. This model would help the church's members learn how to apply sermon content to their unique life-situations in ways that other models may not, and the model would serve two purposes. First, it would help the church's members become disciples who could obey what Jesus commanded; and, second, it would help ensure that I, as a minister, was fulfilling Jesus' command.

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<sup>5</sup>John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988; repr., 2008), 219.

The sermon application group also helped in another key area of ministry. As with any pastorate, there are often responsibilities that detract from a pastor's ability to meaningfully interact with his congregation. One of the auxiliary benefits of choosing a small group model was that it provided the informal setting necessary for me to get to know some of the members of my new flock. My interaction with the members of the group helped me build relationships while at the same time giving me an opportunity to offer guidance in applying God's Word to their lives.

### **Definitions**

It is important to clarify how key terms were used during the course of the project. Following are definitions of key words and phrases used in this manuscript.

*Disciple.* The definition of *disciple* given by F. Wilbur Gingrich was used in the written portion of this project: The word *disciple* means "student, pupil, or apprentice, and is practically [equal to] Christian."<sup>6</sup>

*Discipleship.* The definition of *discipleship* used in this manuscript is the process of making apprentices of Jesus Christ. According to Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus said that making disciples [i.e., students, or apprentices] consists of teaching those who are baptized "to obey all that [he had] commanded."

*Application.* The definition of *application* used in this project is identical with the concept of contextualization discussed by Grant Osborne. According to Osborne, contextualization is "that dynamic process which interprets the significance of a religion

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<sup>6</sup>Felix W. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, ed. Fredrick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 121.

or cultural norm for a group with a different (or developed) cultural heritage.”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, to contextualize a sermon is to discover its contemporary relevance (i.e., significance) within the unique life circumstances of an individual. Or, to put it another way, contextualization is “identical with what homileticians call ‘application.’”<sup>8</sup>

*Sermon application group.* The definition of *sermon application group* discussed by Michael Fabarez was used in this manuscript. The sermon application group is “a group of Christians that gathers around the passage expounded the previous Sunday to decide how they will specifically apply it.”<sup>9</sup> For this project, the sermon application group consisted of only 15 individuals. Limiting the group’s size to this number was not arbitrary but was based on research in the area of small group dynamics offered by Larry Osborne.<sup>10</sup>

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Due to the extent of the project, there were two limitations and two delimitations necessary to keep the project manageable and focused. The first limitation was that the project would only last for a total of fifteen weeks. Those fifteen weeks were divided into the following three sections: 1) two weeks for recruiting and surveying the participants and assessing their pre-understanding of contextualization (i.e., application); 2) eleven weeks for assisting participants in their ability to contextualize the

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<sup>7</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2006), 410.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 184.

<sup>10</sup>Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 76-77.

sermons they heard as well as to supervise the potential future group leaders; 3) one week served as a time to evaluate and reflect upon the participants' data which ultimately determined the final results of the project; and 4) one week served as a time to write chapters four and five of the project.

The second limitation was the possible absence of particular group members over the course of the eleven-week portion of the project. This limitation acknowledged the possibility that certain group members would not be available to participate in the project every week. In the event that a participant had to miss the Sunday morning sermon, he or she had an opportunity to listen to the message online prior to the Wednesday evening discussion. However, in order to consider the data provided by a participant, he or she must have been present at the group's meetings for a minimum of nine weeks of the eleven week portion of the project.

The project also had two delimitations. First, the research group consisted of only 15 church members each over the age of eighteen. My intent in providing this delimitation was to establish a venue that was small enough for each participant to contribute significantly during each of the weekly discussions. At the same time, the venue would be small enough for me to work with and get to know the group's participants individually.

The second delimitation was that only the two group members who were selected as potential future group leaders had an opportunity to lead the group's discussion and receive leader evaluations. The intent of this delimitation was to offer these two individuals practical training that would help them lead an application group in the future.

## **Research Methodology**

The research methodology was that the fifteen-week portion of the project was divided into three phases. Phase one consisted of two weeks of preparation. It included the recruitment of 15 church members each over the age of eighteen to participate in the project, as well as offering those participants the pre-project survey. This phase also included giving instructions which outlined the details of the project.

The second phase of the project consisted of the weekly meetings. These meetings offered participants an opportunity to discuss possible applications of sermon content to their life situations. The sermons were on the following topics: (1) Romans 12:10, Be Devoted to One Another, (2) Romans 15:7, Accept One Another, (3) Romans 15:14, Instruct One Another, (4) 1 Corinthians 12:25, Care for One Another, (5) Galatians 6:2, Bear One Another's Burdens, (6) Ephesians 4:32, Forgive One Another, (7) 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Encourage One Another, (8) Hebrews 10:24-25, Consider One Another, (9) James 5:16, Pray for One Another, (10) 1 Peter 4:10, Serve One Another, (11) John 4:11, Love One Another.

The final phase consisted of a two-week evaluation period. The post-project surveys were administered and the data was compared with the pre-project surveys. The leader evaluation forms were evaluated and final project analysis was completed.

Since the meeting project's three goals was the point of the project, they are repeated here as part of the phase three analysis. The first goal of the project was to help participants improve their ability to apply sermon content, a sixteen question Likert scale survey was developed in order to evaluate the initial and final project data. At the end of the project, this data was evaluated using a t-test for dependent samples. The evaluation was designed to determine whether or not the participants had improved their ability to

contextualize the sermons they heard during the project's eleven week sermon series. The indicator of success for this goal was a positive change of at least 50 percent between the participants' pre- and post-projects surveys.

The second goal of the project was to provide practical training to potential future sermon application group leaders. The method for accomplishing this goal was to appoint two committed lay leaders who already held teaching positions at the church. During the 11 week portion of the project, these two individuals were given four opportunities to observe how I led the group, ask questions, make observations, and discuss with me possible group leadership strategies. After their four weeks of observation, I supervised as they each took four turns leading the group's weekly discussion.

To measure the success of this goal, at the end of each leader's four sessions, the group's members filled out a Leader Evaluation Form for that leader. At the end of each session, I met with the leader to give him my observations and to discuss possible ways he could improve the next time he led the group. At the end of the project, I evaluated the participant's evaluation forms in order to determine two things: first, whether or not that leader had improved his ability to lead the group; and second, whether or not the group's members believed the leader would be a good fit to lead a future group. The indicator of success for this goal was that, by the end of the project, at least one of the two leaders would have received "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" answers on a minimum of 50 percent of his final evaluations.

The third goal of the project was to determine the viability of using sermon application groups as the long-term discipleship training program at DPC. The method for accomplishing this goal was for each of the group's members to take a post-project

survey which indicated whether or not he or she was willing to participate in a future sermon application group.

The procedure for measuring the success of this goal was fairly straight forward. If more than 50 percent of the participants' surveys indicated a willingness to continue attending future sermon application groups, then these groups would become the discipleship training program for the church. If, however, fewer than 50 percent indicated a willingness to participate, then the church would revisit and reformulate the design and methodology of the program.

CHAPTER 2  
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH SERMON  
APPLICATION GROUPS

**Introduction**

During one of his sermons, Jesus asked his listeners the following question: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). For those who heard this question, the implication was obvious. To call Jesus “Lord” while refusing to do what he said was a contradiction. When people called Jesus “Lord” they were affirming that Jesus had the right to instruct them concerning how they lived their lives.<sup>1</sup> And, if Jesus had that right, then those who called him “Lord” were responsible not only to listen to what he said, but also to put what he said into practice. This idea, therefore, became a litmus test for what it meant to be a true disciple of Jesus (see, Matt 7:21 and John 8:31).

Just as it was in the first century, so it is today. The litmus test for today’s disciples is whether or not they affirm Jesus’ lordship over their lives and then live according to that affirmation. However, there is a difficulty which today’s disciples have to deal with that Jesus’ first-century disciples did not. That difficulty arises from that fact

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<sup>1</sup>Werner Forester defines *Lord* as a combination of the “two elements of power and authority.” He says, “A true realization of the unity of the two arises only in an encounter with God, who creates us by absolute power, but is also the absolute authority.” See Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffery Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Library System, 2000), “Κύριος.”

that Christians today are unable to listen to Jesus as he preaches his sermons. Therefore, the question for today's disciples is this: If people cannot listen to Jesus' preaching, how can they put Jesus' words into practice? And if they cannot put Jesus' preaching into practice, how can they affirm Jesus' lordship over their lives?

This chapter seeks to answer the above question by demonstrating how sermon application groups can help present-day followers of Jesus pass the litmus test of true discipleship. The chapter's purpose is to present biblical and theological perspectives for the idea that sermon application groups are one way today's disciples can affirm Jesus' lordship while, at the same time, learning how to put his words into practice.

### **A Biblical Perspective on Disciple-Making**

After his resurrection and just before his ascension into heaven Jesus stood upon a mountain in Galilee and said to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

According to these verses, Jesus commanded his ministers to be what the church today calls "missionaries." As missionaries, their primary responsibility was to go to the nations not only to preach the Gospel, but, more importantly, to *make* disciples.<sup>2</sup>

According to Grant Osborne, "it is critical to note that the command is not to evangelize

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<sup>2</sup>Grant Osborne notes that Jesus' declaration that he has universal authority is what makes possible the world-wide disciple-making mission. See Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, in vol. 1 of *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1079.

but to perform the broader and deeper task of ‘disciplining’ the nations.”<sup>3</sup> While evangelism is the obvious “first step” in fulfilling Jesus’ command, it would be a failure on the part of Jesus’ ministers to simply engage in evangelism while neglecting to employ a strategy for long-term discipleship training.

### **The Baptism Component of Discipleship**

In the words of his Great Commission, Jesus indicated two primary components of discipleship. The first component was baptism. The command to baptize was a subordinate command<sup>4</sup> in which Jesus instructed his ministers to baptize all those from among the nations who became his disciples. According to Osborne, the reason baptism was necessary for those who converted to Christianity is simply because it is the sacramental and initiatory side of discipleship.<sup>5</sup> Osborne notes that “not only does the post-resurrection Jesus launch the universal mission; he also launches baptism as the primary sacrament of initiation into the Christian faith.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus command to baptize, however, is couched in strange language. D. A. Carson, for example, comments on the odd wording of Jesus’ command when he analyzes the phrase “baptizing them ‘εἰς,’ (‘into’)” the name of the Trinity. Carson notes that “the preposition ‘into’ strongly suggests a coming-into-relationship-with or a

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 1080.

<sup>4</sup>William Hendriksen notes that since the main verb of the passage is “make disciples,” the participles *baptizing* and *teaching* are subordinate. William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 1000.

<sup>5</sup>Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, 1081.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 1080

coming-under-the-Lordship-of Jesus. Baptism is a sign both of entrance into Messiah's covenant community and of pledged submission to his lordship."<sup>7</sup> In other words, according to Carson, baptism is the initial sign of one's relationship with Jesus and the sign of one's submission to his lordship.

### **The Teaching Component of Discipleship**

While baptism is the initiatory component of discipleship and identifies the believer as being in relationship with Jesus, it must be remembered that it is only the initiatory aspect. It is the second component that most Christian communities view as the long-term aspect of discipleship. This second component comes as a result of Jesus' second subordinate command in which he instructed his ministers to teach his disciples to observe (i.e., obey) all that he had commanded.

Since this second component includes the aspect of on-going obedience, for the purposes of this project, it is the most relevant of the two components. Grant Osborne remarks that "the emphasis on obeying 'everything I have commanded you' shows that the discourses [of Jesus] are not really didactic material to be learned but more importantly practical injunctions to be lived."<sup>8</sup> Osborne notes that there is a necessary connection between the disciple-making process and a person's affirmation that Jesus is Lord of his or her life. Affirming Jesus' lordship means that people understand that Jesus has the right to give instruction concerning how they live their lives.

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<sup>7</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, abridged ed., ed. John R. Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 134.

<sup>8</sup>Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, 1082.

Furthermore, Jesus' command implies that ministers are to be *continually* teaching. By using the word "continually," I hope to emphasize the on-going nature of the Greek present, active, participle, διδάσκοντες. The implication suggested by the participle is that Jesus intended for his ministers to offer continuous, on-going instruction to those who have been baptized and have become disciples of Jesus. This is to be done with a view toward enabling those disciples to align their lives with what Jesus commanded. In other words, Jesus' ministers are to never stop teaching the necessity of obeying what Jesus commands.

As indicated above, the teaching component also implies that Jesus intended his command to reach far beyond the first century. In fact, while the command was directed at Jesus' first-century ministers, D. A. Carson insists that Jesus did not intend for it to end with them. Instead, Carson states that Jesus meant for this command to extend to all future generations of ministers. He writes, "Remarkably, Jesus does not foresee a time when any part of his teaching will be rightly judged needless, outmoded, superseded, or untrue: *everything* he has commanded must be passed on 'to the very end of the age.'"<sup>9</sup> According to Carson, the mission of discipleship, as Jesus described it, was not to be limited to his first-century ministers. Instead, this mission was to become the mission of successive generations of ministers throughout the church's history.

### **Summary**

The above discussion has been an analysis of Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18-20 for his ministers to go and make disciples of the nations. It explored the process which Jesus himself set forth as the disciple-making method of his ministers

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid. (emphasis in original)

throughout history. The discussion emphasized the two necessary components of the mission as expressed in Jesus' command to both baptize and to teach. The process Jesus set forth indicates that if ministers are going to accomplish their disciple-making mission, their focus must be on how best to employ the two components—but especially that of teaching all that Jesus commanded. The discussion which follows will focus on several texts which can help ministers understand how sermon application groups can enhance the teaching component of their mission.

### **A Biblical Perspective on Sermon Application**

The goal of this section is to offer a perspective on what the Bible says concerning sermon application. It will explore what it means for God's people to apply the biblical principles they hear in sermons to their unique life situations. The assumption throughout the rest of this chapter is that the minister is engaged in his role as a teacher/preacher and that the content of his sermons is drawn from an accurate exegesis of God's word.

#### **Sermon Application According to Ezra**

Between 458 and 433 BC, a Jewish priest named Ezra returned to Jerusalem after being exiled in Babylon for seventy years.<sup>10</sup> According to the book which bears his name, "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). In other words, Ezra determined not only to study God's Law, but also to apply it to his own life and to teach it to God's people.

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<sup>10</sup>Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 207.

Ezra apparently believed that application must necessarily follow from both a dedicated study of Scripture and a hearing of Scripture expounded. And he was dead-serious about making sure application took place not just in his life, but in the lives of those who heard him teach as well. Mervin Breneman observes,

Ezra had dedicated all of himself and all his life to this wonderful ministry. In ‘study, observance of the Law and teaching it’ we have the secret of Ezra’s impact. He loved God’s Word and God’s people. He had “devoted himself” to the three things mentioned, but not as a hobby or pastime activity. He had devoted himself to the ‘study’ of God’s law, to its ‘observance,’ and to ‘teaching’ it.<sup>11</sup>

It would not be an overstatement, then, to think that Ezra’s motivation for teaching God’s word was for those he taught to actually “do” what God’s word commanded.

Ezra’s motivation ought to serve as an example to which today’s ministers should strive as they prepare their messages for God’s people. Like Ezra, ministers today ought to do more than simply devote themselves to the study of Scripture. They ought also to be men who practice what they preach and help others practice it as well. In fact, Ezra’s example should probably be the “gold standard” for how today’s ministers measure their competency as teachers of God’s word.

Concerning Ezra’s penchant for the application, Edwin Yamauchi notes that “[Ezra] not only studied the Scriptures but taught and interpreted them. Bible study was not merely an intellectual discipline but it was also a personal study for his own life and for the instruction of his congregation.”<sup>12</sup> Every minister would probably do well to pray that those words could one day be spoken of him.

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<sup>11</sup>Mervin Breneman, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, The New American Commentary, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Library System, 1993), 129.

<sup>12</sup>Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra* in vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, abridged ed., ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 696.

How effective was Ezra? Nehemiah 8:1-8 gives readers a glimpse. These verses picture all the people of Israel gathered together in one place, and Ezra bringing the book of Moses to where the people had gathered. Verse 4 says Ezra “stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose” and “Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.” As Ezra read from God’s word “the Levites helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” So Ezra’s sermon included both reading and clear explanation.

Then, Nehemiah 8:13-18 describes the results of Ezra’s sermon. Apparently, the leaders of the people gathered with Ezra “in order to study the words of the Law. They found in the Law that the LORD gave a commandment to Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths.” After discovering this command, all the leaders then reissued the command to the congregation. What follows is an Old Testament example of God’s people applying what they heard to their unique life situation.

According to verse 17, the people had not celebrated the Feast of Booths since the time of Joshua the son of Nun. That means nearly one thousand years had passed since they had kept God’s command.<sup>13</sup> It also means that more than one thousand years had passed between the time God originally issued this command in Leviticus 23:40-42 and the reissuing of it by Ezra to his congregation. It is important to note that when God

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<sup>13</sup>Edwin Yamauchi notes that v. 17 “hardly means that no celebrations of the Feast of Booths had taken place since then, as such celebrations are mentioned after the dedication of Solomon’s temple (1Ki 8:65; 2Ch 25:23) and after the return of the exiles (Ezr 3:4). It must mean that the feast had not been celebrated before with such exceptional joyousness or strictness of observance.” Yamauchi, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 715.

first gave the command to celebrate the feast, the people of Israel were living nomadic lives in the wilderness of Sinai.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in order for Ezra's congregation to apply what God had commanded through his sermon, the people would be forced to discover new ways of putting that command into practice within the context of their own unique life circumstances.

After hearing the command, Ezra's listeners immediately went into action. They began gathering "branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." The actions of the people illustrate a determination to contextualize what God had commanded more than a millennium earlier.

Concerning the unique way in which the people applied this command, T. V. Brisco noted that "Leviticus 23:40 instructs the celebrants to gather branches, and tells them to live in booths. But Leviticus does not specify the building of booths, nor does it require pilgrimage to Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup> Brisco's comment is insightful, since Nehemiah 8:16 states that the people began making "booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim." Their actions indicate that the way they applied God's word was not specifically commanded by Moses. This is an example of the people of God not only listening to a sermon, but actually finding a way to put what they heard into practice in their unique life situation.

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<sup>14</sup>T. V. Brisco, "Wanderings of Israel," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1005-13.

<sup>15</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 478-79.

From the example above, it appears that Ezra expected his sermon not only to teach his listeners the statutes and rules of God's word, but also to challenge them to begin applying those statutes and rules to their unique life circumstances. The fact that Ezra's listeners put into practice what they heard, ought to be a motivation to today's ministers. Like Ezra, today's ministers should expect their listeners not only to listen to God's word, but also to discover new ways of putting what they hear into practice.

### **Sermon Application According to Jesus**

When Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount, he told his audience the following parable: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Matt 7:24-27).

Commenting on these verses, R. T. France explains the Greek word translated "does" (ποιεῖ). He says this word is a reference to how Jesus expected his listeners to apply what they heard during his sermon.<sup>16</sup> France says Jesus left his hearers "with a simple but demanding choice: to hear and ignore, or to hear and put into practice."<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson agrees with France when he writes, "A wise person represents those who put

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<sup>16</sup>R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 297.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Jesus' words into practice."<sup>18</sup> It is the concept of "putting into practice (i.e., doing)" what he taught that reveals Jesus' own concept of sermon application. It seems obvious to both France and Carson that Jesus' main concern in his parable of the wise and foolish builders was for his audience to do more than simply listen to what he said. And Jesus' parable draws this truth out in an emphatic way.

Grant Osborne agrees with what France and Carson have stated. In fact, he insists that the responsibility of Christians includes far more than simply listening to sermons. According to Osborne, Christians need to actually do something about the messages they hear. He says they must apply them. Osborne explains his concept of application in a discussion of what he calls "contextualization."<sup>19</sup> He says, "Contextualization occurs when a person discovers the contemporary relevance of a biblical principle, and puts that principle into practice in his or her life."<sup>20</sup> This idea, along with Carson's and France's comments above, is apparently what Jesus had in mind in his parable of the wise and foolish builders.

The parable is, in fact, a powerful illustration of the importance of contextualization. It reveals Jesus' own understanding of sermon application and shows that failing to apply what one hears during a sermon is tantamount to foolishness. Today's ministers should take Jesus' parable to heart as they consider ways to help the members of their congregations contextualize the sermons they hear, for this is the

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<sup>18</sup>Carson, *Matthew*, 37.

<sup>19</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2006), 410.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

difference between disciples who are wise, and those who are not. This should be of vital concern to those ministers who are attempting to fulfill their God-given mission as teachers of all that Jesus commanded.

### **Sermon Application According to James**

Later New Testament writers followed Jesus' example when they warned their fellow-disciples of the necessity of contextualizing the sermons they heard. Jesus' brother, James,<sup>21</sup> for example, wrote a letter to a group of disciples in which he urged them to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (Jas 1:21b-22).

Like Jesus' parable about the wise and foolish builders, James directs his warning at those who "hear" God's word. The very fact that James gives this warning implies that his readers were in the habit of listening to teachers expound the Scriptures.<sup>22</sup> Like Jesus, James believed it was vital not only to listen to God's word, but also to do it. Commenting on James' warning, Thomas Lea writes,

James's command is literally to "keep on becoming doers of God's Word." He insisted on an obedience which lasts. This does not minimize the importance of hearing God's Word. It does emphasize strongly the need for acting. Too often Christians view a sermon as an interesting moral or theological lecture. We need to do something other than sitting and listening.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>For a discussion of various arguments both for and against James' being Jesus' brother, see Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 9-22.

<sup>22</sup>The position taken by Simon Kistemaker is that James' readers listened regularly to Bible teachers. See Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 60.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas D. Lea, *Hebrews & James*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 274.

Lea believes James' warning was not meant to dissuade his readers from listening to sermons, but rather to challenge them to contextualize what they heard.

When James told his readers to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only,” he was challenging them to make a decision. They could either sit and listen to the sermon, and then choose to leave the service unaffected by what they heard, or they could leave the service intending to be “doers” of what they heard. That same decision must be made by every person today who listens to the preaching of God's word.

James' warning is an important statement concerning the critical nature of sermon application. While James intended the warning to be a challenge to first-century disciples, it applies just as meaningfully to those of us living in the twenty-first-century. Every disciple in every age faces the same types of struggles and James' challenge is directed toward those who are tempted to make wrong decisions about whether or not to apply what they hear. Jesus' disciples in every age feel similar cultural pressure to conform their lives to their sinful societies.<sup>24</sup> And since pressure to conform has always been a problem for those desiring to follow Jesus (see Rom 12:2; and 1 John 2:15-17), James' warning is just as important today as it was when he first wrote it.

### **Summary**

The above discussion is an analysis of four biblical texts which present three key Scriptural examples of sermon application. By analyzing the four texts, a biblical perspective concerning the importance of sermon application begins to emerge. The crucial point in each example is that it is not enough to simply listen to God's word. Those who listen must also begin the process of applying what they hear to their unique

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<sup>24</sup>Moo, *The Letter of James*, 24-25.

life situations. This process is what the above discussion refers to as “contextualization,” that is, seeking practical ways to apply sermon content to contemporary circumstances. Contextualization is, therefore, a biblical perspective on sermon application.

### **A Biblical Perspective on Sermon Application Groups**

According to Mark 3:13-14, Jesus “went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.”

Early in his ministry, Jesus apparently determined to use a small group model in which to train select disciples for the ministry.<sup>25</sup> The twelve members of this small group were to have a unique relationship with Jesus that the multitudes would not share. It was within this small group setting that Jesus disclosed interpretations of his teachings which his larger audience was not privy to (see Mark 4:11), but which his small group could internalize in anticipation of their future ministries.

One reason Jesus established this group was in order to offer more intensive discussion concerning his teachings. From the discussion in the section above concerning the parable of the wise and foolish builders, it follows that Jesus expected the members of his small group to not only listen to the private interpretations of his sermons, but also to put into practice what they learned from those interpretations.

An example of this type of discussion appears in Matthew 13:3-9, which follows a parable that Jesus had told the multitudes. In that parable, Jesus said a sower began sowing seeds in his field. As he threw them, the seeds landed in various types of

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<sup>25</sup>William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 133

soil. Depending on which type of soil the seeds landed in, the seeds either became fruitful, or they did not. That was the extent of what Jesus told the multitudes. In verses 18 through 23, however, Jesus' small group came to him seeking an explanation of the parable. Jesus explained the parable's meaning, but only to the members of the small group. Jesus told them that the seed represented "the word of the kingdom," and the soils represented the various heart conditions of those who heard that word. Based on which soil type a person was is what ultimately determined whether or not the word of the kingdom bore fruit. Grant Osborne notes that Jesus' parable "warns all four types of soil about the repercussions of failing to accept Jesus' message."<sup>26</sup>

According to Jesus' explanation, "the seed" only becomes fruitful in a person whose heart is receptive. The others may hear and be temporarily intrigued, but only one type of listener actually puts what he hears into practice. William Hendriksen explains,

This type of person hears because he wants to hear. He reflects on what he hears, for he has faith in the speaker. So he reaches a measure of true understanding. He puts the message into practice and bears fruit: conversion, faith, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc.<sup>27</sup>

Hendriksen's comment is noteworthy because the purpose of Jesus' small group was to prepare its members for a preaching ministry in which the various responses of their listeners would be a matter of eternal life and death—of heaven and hell.

Since Jesus himself chose a small group model for the purpose of helping his disciples understand his sermons, it seems appropriate for present-day ministers to do the same. The effectiveness of this type of program is seen in the successful preaching ministries of those who had been part of Jesus' small group (see Acts 2:41-42).

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<sup>26</sup>Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, 515.

<sup>27</sup>Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 562.

## **Summary**

The above discussion analyzes Jesus' method of using a small group setting to help his disciples understand the content of his sermons. Within that setting, Jesus was able to go into greater interpretive depth, thus enabling his disciples to grasp his teachings in a way that would help them apply what they heard to their future preaching ministries. Two thousand years later, the church is still feeling the effects of Jesus' small group model.

## **A Theological Perspective on Sermon Application Groups**

Since sermon application groups are a model for training disciples, it is important for ministers to understand what constitutes a disciple. It is also important for ministers to grasp how a sermon application group can help them further the spiritual development of the disciples under their spiritual care. This section explores some of the key theological concepts related to the training of disciples.

Training disciples of Jesus assumes that those being trained are already Christians. In other words, they have already been baptized. In order for this to be the case, the following four events must have already taken place in a disciple's life: (1) God must have spiritually regenerated him (John 3:3, 5; 1 Pet 1:23); (2) he must have professed genuine faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:18; 5:24; 20:31); (3) God must have both unilaterally justified (Rom 3:24, 28; 5:1), and definitively sanctified him (1 Cor 1:2; 6:11); and (4) he must have at least begun the process of progressive sanctification (Heb 2:11; 12:14; 1 Pet 1:15-16). While all four of these events are necessary for a person to become a Christian, the discussion in this section will focus primarily on the third and fourth events.

## **Justification and Definitive Sanctification**

Once the Holy Spirit has regenerated someone's spirit and that person has professed genuine faith in Jesus, at that moment God declares that person to be justified. According to Wayne Grudem, "Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight."<sup>28</sup>

The fact that justification is an instantaneous legal act of God implies that it is a one-time action that never requires repeating. Justification, then, is God's unilateral, one-time, legal declaration of "Not guilty" in which God forgives the sins of the believer, and simultaneously declares him or her to be justified in his sight. Since justification is God's work, the believer plays no role in it whatsoever. John Murray explains,

Justification is not our apology nor is it the effect in us of a process of self-excusation. It is not even our confession nor the good feeling that may be induced in us by confession. Justification is not any religious exercise in which we engage however noble and good that religious exercise may be. If we are to understand justification and appropriate its grace we must turn our thought to the action of God in justifying the ungodly.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to note that the only basis for God's declaration of justification is Jesus' perfectly righteous life and redemptive death on the cross.<sup>30</sup> And since that is the case, the believer does not and cannot merit it. While the believer's faith in Jesus is the medium of justification, it is not the cause of justification. As Robert

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<sup>28</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 723.

<sup>29</sup>John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 118.

<sup>30</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 726.

Reymond explains,

Never is our faith-act represented in the New Testament as the ground or the cause of our righteousness. If this were so, faith would become a meritorious work, an idea everywhere opposed by the Apostle Paul who pits faith in Christ over against every human work. We are said to be justified “by faith” (the simple dative—Rom. 3:28, 5:2), “by faith” (ἐκ, *ek*, with the genitive—Rom. 1:17; 3:30; 4:16 (twice), 5:1; 9:30; 10:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24; Heb. 10:38), “through faith” (διὰ, *dia*, with the genitive—Rom. 3:22, 25, 30; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9), “upon faith” (ἐπί, *epi*, with the genitive—Phil. 3:9), and “according to faith” (κατά, *kata*, with the accusative—Heb. 11:7). But never are we said to be justified “because of faith” or “on account of faith” (διὰ, *dia*, with the accusative).<sup>31</sup>

According to Reymond, the believer’s act of faith is not equivalent to a good work (i.e., an act of righteousness). Therefore, faith cannot be the cause of the believer’s right legal standing before God. As stated above, the only cause or ground of the believer’s justification is the perfectly righteous life of Jesus and his redemptive work on the cross.

Since justification is God’s unilateral work, there are consequences which follow necessarily from it. In the eyes of God a normal consequence of justification is what theologians call “definitive sanctification.”<sup>32</sup> Definitive sanctification is how God views the believing sinner as a result of his or her justification. The word *sanctification* is a translation of the Greek word, ἁγιασμός, and carries a range of meaning which includes such concepts as holiness, separation, and consecration.<sup>33</sup> Since definitive sanctification is a consequence of justification, the believing sinner does not, and cannot, merit it. Furthermore, the word *definitive* carries the idea of something that is complete, full, and absolute. Definitive sanctification is, therefore, a completed work.

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<sup>31</sup>Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 745.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 756-57.

<sup>33</sup>Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), s. v. “Sanctification.”

While Christians usually think of sanctification as a process, “the New Testament often represents the Christian as one who *has been sanctified*.”<sup>34</sup> And while the language of definitive sanctification is past tense, the doctrine itself does not teach that justified sinners actually live holy lives, for they do not. In fact, definitive sanctification, like justification, is strictly how God views a justified sinner. Robert Reymond gives an excellent summary of this concept when he writes,

The doctrine of definitive sanctification does not mean that the Christian actually achieves, personally and existentially, sinless perfection the moment he trusts Christ; this would leave no room for progressive sanctification. Besides, entire sanctification awaits the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1Thess. 5:23). And the Christian who says he has no sin is deceiving himself and the truth is not in him (1 John 1:8). But what it does mean is that every Christian, the moment he becomes a Christian, by virtue of his union with Christ, is instantly constituted a “saint” and enters into a new relationship with respect to the former reign of sin in his life and with God himself, in which new relationship he ceases to be a slave to sin and becomes a servant of Christ and of God.<sup>35</sup>

Both justification and definitive sanctification are unilateral works of God and are, therefore, objective experiences in which the believer plays no part whatsoever. There is, however, another experience in which the believer does play a part. It is this experience that should inspire ministers to form sermon application groups.

### **Progressive Sanctification**

While the Bible sometimes speaks of sanctification in the past tense, it often refers to it in the present and future tenses.<sup>36</sup> When this happens, the sanctification being spoken of is not a one-time act, but is rather viewed as an ongoing process which some

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<sup>34</sup>Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 756 (emphasis in original).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 758.

<sup>36</sup>See Reymond’s discussion and Scripture references in *New Systematic Theology*, 767-68, and Grudem’s discussion in *Systematic Theology*, 748-49.

theologians refer to as “progressive” sanctification.<sup>37</sup>

In progressive sanctification, believers actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit in learning to reject their tendency to obey ungodly desires while at the same time learning to obey what God commands (see Gal 5:16-25). Wayne Grudem explains the role Christians play in progressive sanctification when he writes,

[The] active role which we are to play is indicated by Romans 8:13, where Paul says, “If by the Spirit *you* put to death the deeds of the body you will live.” Here Paul acknowledges that it is “by the Spirit” that we are able to do this. But he also says we must do it! It is not the Holy Spirit who is commanded to put to death the deeds of the flesh, but Christians!<sup>38</sup>

According to Grudem, progressive sanctification is something in which Christians participate. It is the type of sanctification in which Christians actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit in killing the sinful deeds of the fallen human nature. But it is also clear that the responsibility for actually doing this killing falls on the Christian. And, according to the Bible, that responsibility continues throughout the Christian’s entire earthly life and he or she will not see its completeness until the resurrection (see 1 John 3:2-3).

While progressive sanctification includes the negative aspect of killing the ungodly deeds of the flesh, it also includes the positive aspect of obeying what God commands. In Philippians 2:12-13, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” According to these verses, Paul was

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<sup>37</sup>See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 748; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 534; and Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 328.

<sup>38</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 754.

holding the Philippians responsible for cooperating with God in working out their salvation. He implies that this work must include obeying what he had apparently taught them on an earlier occasion (quite possibly through his Bible teaching). Paul's comment is what progressive sanctification is all about.

### **Summary**

Sermon application groups can help today's ministers delve into greater interpretive depth than they can in a single sermon. In addition, these groups provide a setting in which today's disciples can discuss how to apply God's word to their unique life situations, thus helping them cooperate with God in "working out [their] salvation with fear and trembling."

In order for someone to become a disciple of Jesus, he or she must have already experienced God's unilateral declaration of justification, as well as the natural consequence of that declaration which is definitive sanctification. Both of these experiences are objective realities in the mind of God and their only basis is the perfect life and redemptive death of Jesus.

When it comes to establishing sermon application groups, however, it is neither justification nor definitive sanctification which makes these groups necessary. What makes the groups necessary is the idea of progressive sanctification. Since progressive sanctification includes the Christian's cooperation, it would be beneficial to have a means for helping him or her achieve that end. Sermon application groups are one way to do that.

Since it is the responsibility of the Christian to kill the ungodly deeds of the body and to actively obey what God teaches in his word, the Christian is far more likely

to progress in these two responsibilities if he or she has practical help in understanding how to do them. Sermon application groups can offer a venue that will provide the kind of vital assistance Christians need in those areas.

### **Conclusion**

The litmus test for Christian discipleship is not only to call Jesus “Lord” but also to do what he says. It is important, therefore, that today’s ministers discover a way to help their congregations do that. The Bible gives examples of believers gathering in groups to listen to the word of God while searching for ways to apply what they heard to their unique life situations. Jesus himself taught that application through contextualization was imperative for those who would be wise followers of his teachings. Jesus’ brother, James, confirms this affirmation by telling his readers to “be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving [themselves].”

Jesus’ own model for accomplishing the task of disciple-making was to establish a small group setting in which the group’s members could dig deeper into his teachings and discuss the implications of what he said. Jesus established this group and conducted it in anticipation of helping the group’s members discover ways to apply what he taught them. This small group model was extremely successful as evidenced by the effectiveness of the subsequent ministries of the group’s members.

Today’s ministers are in a difficult position. Like their first-century counterparts, Jesus has commanded them to make disciples and to do it by baptizing the nations and by teaching those who are baptized to obey everything he has commanded. Just like their first-century counterparts, today’s ministers teach that Jesus is Lord of all of life and that he has the right to instruct his followers concerning how to live their lives.

But one thing today's ministers must always keep in mind is that sermon application is not automatic. Therefore, ministers must understand that there is more to fulfilling Jesus' command than simply telling people to obey him. Instead, today's ministers must find a way to help people obey him.

By establishing sermon application groups, today's ministers have an opportunity to imitate Jesus by helping their congregations discover ways of applying God's word. This is one of the biblical and theological motivations for beginning a sermon application group.

CHAPTER 3  
CONTEMPORARY AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON SERMON APPLICATION GROUPS

**Introduction**

Sermon application groups can be a significant means for helping today's ministers encourage their congregations to become "doers of the word and not hearers only." Shortly after the Protestant Reformation, Pietist leader and Lutheran pastor, Philip Jacob Spener, promoted the idea of a small group setting in which God's people could gather to discuss sermon content with a view toward making personal applications.<sup>1</sup>

A little more than one hundred years after Martin Luther penned his ninety-five theses, Spener realized that "dead orthodoxy had come to prevail in the Lutheran Church. All emphasis was on purity of doctrine. There was no appeal to the emotions—no call to conversion and Christian service and a devoted Christian life."<sup>2</sup> Church historian, John Weborg, describes Spener's thinking,

Spener sought a way to renew the church from the inside out. In his thinking, one could begin in a small way and with a few people and watch the "practice of theology" bear fruit. What emerged was a small group of people who met to discuss the Sunday sermon and to make application to their lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 184.

<sup>2</sup>B. K. Kuiper, *The Church In History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 271.

<sup>3</sup>John Weborg, "Reborn in Order to Renew," in *Pietism: A Much-Maligned Movement Re-examined*, Christian History, Issue 10, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), quoted in Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, 185.

Spener saw the formation of small groups of application-minded believers as a means for turning the tide of doctrinal lethargy in his day. And he used these groups to encourage Christians to become doers of God’s word, and not hearers only.

Today, there seems to be a problem similar to what Spener experienced back in 1635. Many of today’s Christians are also failing to put into practice what they have learned from the Bible. In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren, Senior Pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, observes that many of today’s Christians “already know far more than they are putting into practice.”<sup>4</sup> And Michael Fabarez, Senior Pastor of Compass Bible Church in Orange County, California, writes that “it is hard to deny that most of us suffer from biblical indigestion—we know far more than we are currently putting into practice!”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Larry Osborne, Lead Pastor of North Coast Church in northern San Diego County, California summarizes the situation lamented by Warren and Fabarez, when he writes,

Every Church is full of people who feel they should do more when it comes to reading the Bible, prayer, fellowship, and reaching out to meet the needs of others. But busy schedules, procrastination, and a lack of commitment all conspire to keep these things from happening.<sup>6</sup>

The point is that today’s Christians are struggling with how to put into practice what they study in their Bibles and what they hear during Sunday morning worship services.

Evidently, contemporary pastors like Warren, Fabarez, and Osborne believe these Christians could use a program that would help them actually do what the Bible teaches.

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<sup>4</sup>Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 342.

<sup>5</sup>Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, 184.

<sup>6</sup>Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 55.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine several contemporary and practical perspectives on sermon application groups. It will seek to answer the question of why sermon application groups are a valid means of discipleship training and how they can help today's disciples become doers of God's word. By examining these perspectives, a picture will begin to emerge of how contemporary pastors can implement sermon application groups and why they should consider using these groups as a model for their church's discipleship training program.

### **The Need for Sermon Application**

Biblical references abound concerning the importance of applying Scriptural truth to one's unique life circumstances (see Matt 7:15-21, 24-27; Jas 1:22-25). Both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament repeatedly affirmed this idea, as did the early Protestant Reformers and the seventeenth century Puritans. The Puritans, for example, used to teach their children this idea in the early years of their catechetical training. In fact, the fifth question of the 1643 version of the Westminster Larger Catechism asks, "What do the Scriptures principally teach?" The Catechism responds with the following answer: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man."<sup>7</sup> In the minds of the Puritans, the purpose of Scripture is two-sided. First, it teaches Christians what to believe about God, and second, it teaches them what to do about it. That is, it teaches the practical application of God's word in their lives. So the Puritans, like Jesus, believed that the application of biblical principles was the touchstone of Christian discipleship training.

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<sup>7</sup>Morton H. Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999), 14.

## **Sermon Application as the Obligation of the Minister**

While the application of biblical principles is ultimately the obligation of individual Christians, many theologians and preachers in recent generations have placed the responsibility for application on the minister who preaches biblical messages those Christians hear. Those theologians and pastors have recognized the link between the proclamation of biblical truth and the personal application of those truths to daily life. For many of these theologians and pastors, personal application finds its apex not just in the hearing of sermons, but also in the preaching of sermons. These theologians and pastors believe the obligation to make God's word applicable falls directly on the shoulders of the minister, since it is the minister who preaches the sermons. Therefore, in their minds, it is the minister who has the added burden of finding a way to help his listeners apply what they hear during the course of his sermons.

An example of this burden is found in the Book *Preaching That Changes Lives*, by Michael Fabarez. Just before he catalogs the sentiments of several theologians and preachers from contemporary and by-gone generations, Fabarez writes that "Truth without application is inadequate."<sup>8</sup> He then goes on to quote men like J. I. Packer, professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia who notes that "preaching is essentially teaching plus application where the *plus* is lacking something less than preaching takes place."<sup>9</sup> Fabarez also quotes nineteenth-century Baptist theologian and preacher, John A. Broadus, as noting that "the application in a sermon is

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<sup>8</sup>Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, xiv

<sup>9</sup>Dick Lucas, *Preaching the Living Word: Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly* (London, England: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 31 (emphasis in original), quoted in Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, xiv.

not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing.”<sup>10</sup> Fabarez then mentions a quote by the popular nineteenth century British Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who wrote that, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.”<sup>11</sup> Fabarez then quotes Spurgeon at length as saying,

Far too many pulpit discourses have been put together on wrong principles. Some have expounded biblical doctrine without applying it, thus qualifying as lectures rather than preachments (for lecturing aims only to clear the head, while preaching seeks to change the life); some have been no more than addresses focusing the present self-awareness of the listeners, but not at any stage confronting them with the Word of God. . . . Such discourses are less than preachin...but because they were announced as sermons they are treated as preaching and people’s idea of preaching get formed in terms of them, so that the true conception of preaching is forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

The pastors and theologians whom Fabarez quotes obviously see a vital link between the preaching of sermons and personal application. And for these writers, at least, this link is a touchstone of Christian discipleship.

Other preachers and teachers, and especially those who write books on the topic of homiletics, also see a link between sermons and application. These men lament the fact that many of today’s sermons lack motivation for personal application. They also express their desire to help preachers repair this issue by counseling them to work on ways to make their sermons more application oriented. John Bisagno, for example, is the former Lead Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas and a proponent of helping ministers understand the importance of preaching sermons that listeners can

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<sup>10</sup>John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., rev. Vernon L. Stanfield (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1979), 165, quoted in Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, xiv.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., xiv.

apply. Bisagno writes that “most pastors preach a sermon outline that is really rather predictable. The points usually contain life application principles, though not identified primarily as such.”<sup>13</sup> Bisagno goes on to give instruction concerning how preachers can make their sermons more application friendly.

John MacArthur, Senior Pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California emphasizes the minister’s role in discovering personal applications when he writes that “Bible study is not complete until the truth discovered is applied to life situations.”<sup>14</sup> Jim Shaddix, Pastor for Teaching and Training at The Church At Brook Hills in Birmingham, Alabama informs ministers that application “is not primarily about addressing perceived needs with practical advice but addressing real needs and restoring right relationships.”<sup>15</sup> John Cheeseman, in his book *The Priority of Preaching*, comments concerning the necessity of application within the minister’s sermon, when he writes that “people want to hear something that is relevant to them in their daily lives. We must spare no effort in making our application as real and down-to-earth as we can.”<sup>16</sup> For MacArthur, Shaddix, and Cheesman, there is a necessary connection between sermons and personal application. For these pastors, the obligation for sermon application falls, at least in part, on the shoulders of those who preach God’s word.

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<sup>13</sup>John R. Bisagno, *Principle Preaching: How to Create and Deliver Sermons For Life Applications* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2002), 3.

<sup>14</sup>John F. MacArthur Jr., *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 217.

<sup>15</sup>Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2003), 102.

<sup>16</sup>John Cheeseman, *The Priority of Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 17.

Andy Stanley is a final example of a contemporary pastor who sees an important connection between preaching and personal application. Stanley is Senior Pastor of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia and coauthor with Lane Jones of the book, *Communicating for a Change*. In their book, Stanley and Jones outline a model for preachers to follow in order to preach sermons that are geared toward personal application. The authors challenge pastors to learn to preach sermons that listeners can identify with so they can see how God's word can help them in their unique life situations. Stanley and Jones address today's preachers when they write,

Every single person who sits politely and listens to you on Sunday is one decision away from moral, financial, and marital ruin. Every one of 'em. Many are considering options with consequences that will follow them the remainder of their lives. There are husbands teetering on the brink of unfaithfulness. Wives whose schedules are unsustainable. Couples who are drowning in a sea of debt. Teenagers who are there because their parents forced them to come. Young men who have been told they are gay. Young ladies who have been told their worth goes no further than their physical beauty. There they sit. Silent. Waiting. Hoping. Doubting. Anticipating. What are we going to do? What are you going to do? What are you going to say?<sup>17</sup>

Stanley's words are potent. They speak directly to the need for today's ministers to begin recognizing their obligation to craft sermons that are application oriented. Indeed, if today's ministers desire to help their listeners apply God's word to their lives, they must concentrate on forming their sermons and focusing their communication with an eye toward life changing applications.

Contemporary works like those mentioned above could be multiplied, but the point is clear. The burden of personal application falls, at least in part, upon the shoulders of those who preach. A major component of the commission Jesus gave his

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<sup>17</sup>Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2006), 88-89.

ministers in Matthew 28:18-20 was for them to make disciples by teaching them to observe everything he had commanded. If today's ministers are going to fulfill that commission, they must help those whom God has placed in their spiritual care to become "doers" of God's word. In order to do that they must be willing to help today's disciples apply what they hear in sermons.

### **Sermon Application as the Obligation of the Individual**

While ministers are responsible for helping today's disciples apply God's word to their lives, there are two further ideas to consider. First, in order to understand their obligation to apply God's word, individual Christians must take into account the idea of divine redemption as a motivation for personal application. Divine redemption is a biblical concept which reveals the reason God sent Jesus into the world. Wrapped in that reason is the idea that Jesus' life and cross-work would ultimately enable his disciples to be conformed into his likeness (see Rom 8:29-30; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10). It is this idea of conformity to Jesus' likeness that ultimately links personal application with biblical redemption.

Regarding this link, Daniel Doriani, former professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, writes that "the goal of our redemption is to make us more and more like God, and ever more like Christ, who is the perfect image of God."<sup>18</sup> Doriani notes that if the transformation into Christ's image is going to take place, Christians must respect the Bible enough to apply what it says to their lives. For Doriani, redemption and personal application are inseparably linked and

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<sup>18</sup>Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 13.

are the measure of one's relationship with God. Doriani continues:

Bible application promotes a relationship with God and conformity to Him. We honor the laws because we exalt God, who gave it and reveals himself in it. We honor virtue because virtue is conformity to God's character (not simply because no one can take it from us). This double goal of knowing God and conforming to him pervades Scripture, from Eden to Sinai to the teaching of Jesus and Paul."<sup>19</sup>

For Doriani, conformity to the likeness of Jesus is a major motivation for personal application of God's word. And since the Christian's conformity is thoroughly dependent upon the application of God's word, it is incumbent upon him or her to maintain respect for God's word as it is revealed on the pages of the Bible.

The reason that applying biblical truths is so necessary for transformation into Jesus' likeness is simply due to the fact that every passage in the Bible points to Jesus. The Bible tells the disciple who Jesus is, how he thinks, his character, what he came to do, and so forth. All of which is necessary information if one is to be conformed into Jesus' likeness. Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky views this idea as a major reason to apply the Bible. Mohler says that "every single text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ. . . . He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and every story in the Bible ends with Him. . . . Every text—not just the ones we know well—cries out about the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup>

It is apparent, then, that personal application of biblical truth is absolutely necessary. This fact is necessary since God's ultimate goal for Christians is for them to be progressively transformed into the likeness of Jesus. And God's redemptive purpose

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 14

<sup>20</sup>R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 96-97.

becomes a major motivation for personal application of the Bible. The point is that if one is going to see the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose in his or her life, personal application must be taking place.

However, as important as the idea of redemption is for personal application, there is another idea that ought to offer even more motivation. That idea is nothing less than the coming Day of divine Judgment (see 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5). While redemption as a motivation for personal application calls for progressive transformation into the likeness of Jesus, the Day of Judgment warns that Christians will one day give account for how well they have progressed in that transformation (Rom 2:16; 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:9-11).

In their book *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, Walter Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson remind their readers that "judgment is individual, not corporate. Each of us is responsible for applying the Scriptures to our lives and each of us must give an account before God of how we have done."<sup>21</sup> For Henrichsen and Jackson the coming Day of divine Judgment serves as an important incentive for Jesus' disciples to apply of God's word to their lives.

Furthermore, since, the Day of Judgment promises to evaluate the actions of Jesus' disciples, Henrichsen and Jackson point out that simply knowing the specific activities God requires is not enough. There is, in fact, no promise of recompense for knowledge, even though one needs a certain amount of knowledge in order to do what God wants done. The two authors warn that "the primary purpose of the Bible is to

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<sup>21</sup>Walter Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson, *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 282.

change our lives, not increase our knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Christians should not simply study the Bible or listen to sermons in order to gain more knowledge about Jesus. Instead, they should study their Bibles and listen to sermons with a view toward discovering ways to apply what they learn to their unique life circumstances. As Bryan Chapell notes, “Those who study the Bible only to gain more information may believe their minds are expanding when, in fact, only their heads are swelling. Knowledge, purely for knowledge sake “puffeth up” (1 Cor 8:1).”<sup>23</sup>

### **Summary**

From the time of Jesus to the present, Christians have viewed personal application of God’s word as a hallmark of the Christian life. Jesus himself implored his ministers to teach his disciples to obey his commands. And throughout Church history his ministers have done this by catechizing their congregations and by preaching sermons in such a way as to help listeners apply what they have heard.

Today, Christian ministers must begin to take responsibility for helping their congregations apply God’s word to their lives. This is an obligation that has apparently been lost in contemporary churches. Many of today’s Christian theologians and pastors have recognized the problem and have begun encouraging their fellow-ministers to step up and fulfill their obligation to help Christians begin to apply God’s word.

While this encouragement is for ministers to help their congregations become “doers” of God’s word, the responsibility for applying that word ultimately falls on the individual Christian. Each Christian must understand that application plays a major role

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>23</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 17.

in the redemptive purposes of God. One would think that this alone would be enough of a motivation, but it is not. Therefore, in light of the coming Day of divine Judgment, individual Christians must begin to recognize their obligation to become “doers” of God’s word and not merely hearers.

### **The Need for Sermon Application Groups**

Since sermon application is an obligation for both ministers and individual Christians, there needs to be a conscious effort on the part of both to ensure that sermon application is taking place. One way to fulfill this obligation is to incorporate sermon application into a church’s discipleship training program. If ministers can develop a discipleship training program that incorporates sermon application, they can not only fulfill their own obligation, but they can help the Christians under their spiritual care fulfill their obligation as well. This is where sermon application groups can pay enormous dividends.

### **What is a Sermon Application Group?**

A sermon application group is a group of Christians who meet at an appointed time during the week in order to discuss the possible life applications of a given sermon. While this group is technically what churches identify as a small group, cell group, or home group its purpose differs from these other groups in a significant way. For example, the purpose of a typical home group or cell group is primarily for fellowship and Bible study. And while these may take place at the meeting of a sermon application group, they are not the primary focus of the group. Instead, the primary focus of the sermon application group is sermon application.

Michael Fabarez, for example, discusses the difference between what takes place during a typical small group meeting and what takes place in a sermon application group. In referring to the difference between the two, Fabarez writes,

I am not referring to the kind of small group that gathers people in a circle to ask what a passage of Scripture means. I am talking about a group of Christians that gathers around the passage expounded the previous Sunday to decide how they will specifically apply it.<sup>24</sup>

For Fabarez, there are two ways small groups can discuss a biblical passage. One of those ways is to focus on the meaning of the passage. The other is to focus on how the passage can apply to the lives of people. The latter is the main goal of a sermon application group.

### **Potential Benefits of Developing A Sermon Application Group**

A discipleship training program that includes a sermon application group can provide a number of benefits for both ministers and the individual Christians they serve. One of those benefits is that it can assist ministers in helping Christians mature no matter what stage of spiritual development those Christians have attained.

Obviously, not everyone has achieved the same level of spiritual growth in their Christian lives. In fact, it would be safe to say that no two Christians will be at the exact same level of spiritual maturity at the same time. Yet a lot of contemporary churches have discipleship training programs that treat Christians as if they were all at the same spiritual level. Instead of focusing on teaching Christians how to mature spiritually, these programs tend to focus on imparting abstract biblical and theological knowledge.

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<sup>24</sup>Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 184.

For example, Larry Osborne describes his experience in an early version of a discipleship training program:

I was weaned on a linear, step-by-step discipleship model. I attended a new believers' class designed to teach the basics of theology and how to develop a personal walk with God. Though it had almost nothing to do with the stuff new Christians struggle with—casting aside sinful habits and cleaning up our act—we were provided with a classy binder to put our notes in. Once we'd hung around too long to be called new Christians anymore, we were expected to work our way through a series of classes, programs, and training designed to pass along key skills and basic theology.<sup>25</sup>

Osborne then went on to add that “it was a slick process. It made sense on a flowchart. It was relatively easy to administer. It had a fairly high compliance rate. And it had little to nothing to do with how we actually grew.”<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of a sermon application group, on the other hand, has everything to do with how Christians actually grow. These groups take into account the realistic differences in spiritual maturity between members of the group. And because each member focuses on how God's word can apply specifically to his or her own life, it will not matter what stage of spiritual development he or she has attained. Each member is focused on how the previous Sunday's sermon applies to his or her life and it really does not matter if the person has been a Christian for decades or days. Therefore, each member of the group is free to grow at his or her own rate. As a result, no one person can feel slighted because he or she is forced to learn from a curriculum that is too advanced, while no other person is made to feel spiritually superior, since each member of the group is simply searching his or her own life for ways to apply God's word within the context of his or her own unique life circumstances. As Osborne so points out,

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<sup>25</sup>Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 41-42.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

The focus of a sermon-based small group is not so much on the curriculum as it is on the process. There is no set body of information that must be covered in a particular order. The topic in any one week simply flows out of whatever was taught in the previous weekend's sermon.<sup>27</sup>

This is the real genius behind developing a sermon application group. Each member of the group, no matter what stage of spiritual development he or she has attained, simply concerns his or herself with how the previous week's sermon applies to his or her unique life circumstances.

A second potential benefit to be gained from developing a sermon application group concerns the attention the group's members must pay to the contents of Sunday's sermon. No minister can expect his listeners to hang on his every word. However, if those in his audience know they will be discussing possible applications of what he says during his sermon, they are likely to listen more attentively than perhaps they normally would. Fabarez speaks concerning how sermon application groups change the way the group's members listen to sermons, when he writes,

Their anticipation of these meetings changes the way they listen to each message. They know there will be a personal discussion about the truth of the passage and its demands upon their own lives. They understand, in the most profound way, that the preaching of God's Word is not for their entertainment, or solely for increased knowledge. More than others, participants in these groups recognize that God intends every sermon to change their lives.<sup>28</sup>

Fabarez recognizes that one of the potential benefits of developing a sermon application group is that members of the group will be more attentive to the sermons they hear. This in and of itself ought to make ministers not only happy but also more focused as they prepare their messages for Sunday mornings.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>28</sup>Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 185.

A third potential benefit derived from developing a sermon application group is leadership development. Christians within many of today's churches seem to expect their pastor to do most, if not all, of the teaching and mentoring of the church's congregants. In his book, *Sticky Church*, Larry Osborne discusses this tendency under a subheading he titled "The Holy Man Myth." Writing from a pastor's perspective, Osborne observes,

I could never figure out how people's seeming dependence on my prayers, advice, and physical presence squared with our stated belief in the priesthood of the believer—the New Testament doctrine that every follower of Christ has the privilege of direct access to God. It's hardly a peripheral doctrine. It's one that God himself emphasized when he ripped open the temple curtain that had, until Jesus' death separated the Holy of Holies from everyone but the high priest. This event symbolized the end of an era when a special holy man was needed to stand in the gap to mediate between God and man.<sup>29</sup>

Developing a sermon application group can help relieve the idea that the pastor must always be the spiritual teacher and mentor.

A sermon application group can help alleviate this misconception by training lay group leaders in the art of helping others apply sermon content to their unique life circumstances. Osborne also comments on this benefit when he writes that "small group leaders inevitably step up and assume roles of spiritual leadership that they would have otherwise deferred to the pastoral staff."<sup>30</sup>

In using the sermon application group model, ministers have a venue in which to develop future leaders not only for sermon application groups, but also for discipleship training programs which the minister may want to implement in the future. In his book, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, LeRoy Eims comments on leadership development

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<sup>29</sup>Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 49.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

within a discipleship training program, when he writes that through leadership training a minister is “able to equip the disciples, and spend in-depth training time with the workers, producing leaders of disciple-making teams.”<sup>31</sup> The result of this kind of development, according to Eims, is that the minister actually reproduces other servant-type leaders. Eims describes this outcome when he writes, “Ultimately, a leader—a servant leader—is a man who can go to another pool of manpower and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God reproduce the kind of ministry in which he himself was raised up.”<sup>32</sup>

According to both Eims and Larry Osborne, the opportunity to develop lay-leaders is one of the key benefits of discipleship training programs generally, and of sermon application groups specifically. In order to experience this benefit ministers must identify and recruit potential leaders and ensure that those leaders become part of the group. Once aboard, a potential leader can observe the minister as he leads the group, thus learning how to help the group’s members discover specific life applications.

### **Summary**

A sermon application group is a group of Christians who meet throughout the week in order to discuss the possible applications of a given sermon. The application discussed in this group is not general but specific in nature. The intent of the group is for each of the group’s members to discover how the previous week’s sermon relates to his or her unique life circumstances. It is apparent, therefore, that this kind of group differs from ordinary home groups, or cell groups, in that its main function is not fellowship or

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<sup>31</sup>LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 182.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

Bible study, as is typical in other types of small group settings. Instead, the function of sermon application groups is to focus exclusively on how the group's members can apply the biblical principles they hear in a sermon to their specific life situations.

One potential benefit of developing a sermon application group is that it can minister to Christians at any stage of spiritual development. As noted above, the discipleship training in many churches today seems to focus on training that is either too advanced for the beginning Christian, or too basic for the more mature believer. This appears to be the primary reason small group ministries are struggling to produce mature believers. However, involvement in the kind of sermon application group described above can help alleviate that issue by offering a venue in which spiritual advancement depends on nothing more than the member's growing ability to apply sermon content to his or her own life.

A second benefit of developing a sermon application group is that it encourages the group's members to be more attentive to the sermons they hear than, perhaps they normally would be. Since one of the obligations of a minister is to ensure that the Christians which God has placed under his care are becoming "doers" of God's word, it is incumbent upon him to help those Christians apply the Bible to their lives. A sermon application group can help him do that. When these members know they will be discussing and applying a given sermon, it will motivate them to listen to that sermon in a way they may not normally have listened in the past.

A third benefit of forming a sermon application group is that it develops lay leaders for future discipleship training programs. These leaders are not the typical individuals who are chosen to lead other types of small groups, but they are competent

men and women who have a track record as established teachers from within the congregation. As these potential leaders are given an opportunity to observe how the minister leads the group and the various ways the group's members interact with the content of the sermons, these potential leaders should be able to gain enough experience and confidence to lead the group's discussions. These leaders should have no trouble catching on with how to apply the sermon to the situations that are unique to the individual lives of the group's members. This, then, will free up the minister to begin expanding the church's discipleship training program by developing new groups with new potential leaders, thus perpetuating the process.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to explore the idea of sermon application as the obligation of both the preacher and the individuals to whom the preacher ministers. The chapter has offered perspectives from various contemporary theologians, pastors, and homileticians on the subject of sermon application and its importance in the life of Christians. The chapter focused heavily on the value of sermon application groups as a valid means of helping pastors assist their people to become doers of God's word, instead of merely hears.

In the course of the chapter I have explored several potential benefits of developing sermon application groups. I set forth the value of such a program for helping Christians grow spiritually no matter what stage of development they are in. The chapter also discussed the importance of developing lay leaders to lead future discipleship training programs. The main point of the chapter, however, was to offer contemporary justification for making sermon application groups a part of discipleship training.

Today's ministers have a unique opportunity to help their congregations learn to apply God's word. Since many of Christians today are finding it difficult to put into practice the biblical principles they learn, ministers must work harder than ever to discover practical ways to help their congregants apply those principles to their lives. Thankfully, many theologians and homileticians have identified this as a major issue among Christians and they have begun to produce written works to assist ministers in developing ways to help those Christians overcome this problem.

CHAPTER 4  
ELEMENTS OF THE MINISTRY  
RESEARCH PROJECT

The project began in early January 2014 when I began asking for volunteers who would be willing to participate in a fifteen week ministry research project that would help me fulfill a major requirement for the completion of my Doctor of Ministry program. I asked those who were interested to attend an informal informational meeting in which I explained the concept of the project in broad terms and attempted to generate enthusiasm among the potential participants. My goal at the time was to have between 12 and 15 adult church members volunteer to participate in the project. I also asked that among those volunteers there would be at least two lay leaders who were already serving in teaching positions within the church.

As a result, a total of 12 church members, including two lay leaders, had agreed to participate in the project. I informed the volunteers that the intent of the project was to accomplish three goals that would help determine the direction of the church's future discipleship training program. Those goals were, (1) to develop a sermon application group that would help the participants improve their ability to apply sermon content to their unique life situations; (2) to provide practical training for future sermon application group leaders; and (3) to determine the viability of using sermon application groups as a model for the church's discipleship training program which I intended to implement the following year.

### **Phase 1: Recruitment of Volunteers**

Phase one began in early January with the recruitment of the volunteers for the project. My goal was to enlist between 12 and 15 adult church members with two of those members being lay leaders who were already functioning in a teaching capacity within the church. The purpose for enlisting 12 to 15 people was simply to have an opportunity to train as many congregants as possible during the project. That number would also offer enough data to give the project a reasonable evaluation.

Once the volunteers committed to the project, I made them aware of the requirements necessary for the project's completion. One of those requirements was for the volunteers to take a survey before participating in the eleven-week sermon application group. This survey included sixteen questions which helped gather preliminary data in the following four areas, (1) their understanding of discipleship; (2) their understanding of sermon application; (3) their ability to apply sermon content to the unique circumstances of their lives; and (4) Their interest in discussing possible sermon applications with one another in a small group setting. I administered the survey on the first evening of the project. There was no time limit and the group's members completed the surveys and returned them that same evening.

### **Phase 2: Conducting the Project**

The purpose of the project was to form a sermon application group to use as a potential model for the church's future discipleship training program. The group included 12 adult members who met once per week on Wednesday evenings in order to discuss possible applications of the sermons I preached during the eleven-week portion of the project.

Since the Sunday morning sermons served as the basis for the group's discussions, the content of the sermons in series played an important role in the project. Therefore, I specifically designed each sermon with an eye toward ease in generating ideas for possible life application. My intention was to make it as easy as possible for the group's members to grasp each sermon's content so they would have little trouble applying what they heard to their lives.

The title of the series was "One Another" and its basis was the several Bible passages in which Jesus and his Apostles revealed how Christians ought to treat one other as members of God's family. At this point, I want to reemphasize that the content of the sermons was very basic and very application friendly. I designed the sermons this way in the hope that it would help the group's members gain the skills and confidence necessary to apply the content of these sermons to their lives.

### **Synopsis of the Sermon Series**

Following is a brief synopsis of each sermon from the project's eleven week sermon series. Each synopsis offers a summary of the sermon's introduction, main point, and conclusion. Let me again remind the reader that I designed this series to include content that would easily lend itself to real life applications.

#### **Sermon 1**

After introducing the focus of the entire series, the first sermon emphasized the idea of *being devoted to one another* as a key characteristic of members of God's family, as discussed in Romans 12:9-13. The introduction to the sermon illustrated the connection between the Christian's biological family and his or her church family. I made the point that just as there are differences in opinions, interests, strengths and

weaknesses, ideas, and problems among the members of one's biological family, there is sure to be similar differences among one's church family as well. I then pointed out that selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-focus are key sins that we must overcome if we are to keep the family relationship intact.

After the introduction, I discussed the command of the Apostle Paul given to the church in Romans 12:9. In that verse, Paul wrote, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." During the exposition, I suggested that when Christians are willing to act in brotherly love by setting aside their personal preferences for the sake of unity, only then can there be any genuine devotion within the church family. Then I emphasized that acquiring an attitude like that would help Christians honor one another above themselves.

I concluded the sermon with a call for a decision. I asked those in the audience whether or not they were willing to devote themselves to their church family in key areas of their lives; areas such as: attendance, prayer, finances, fellowship, work, and witness. I then asked those who were willing to affirm that decision to stand as a public gesture of their devotion to one another in those areas.

## **Sermon 2**

The text for the second sermon was John 13:34-35. The topic of this sermon was, *loving one another*. In the introduction I made the statement that one of the greatest things a dad can do for his children is to love their mother. As an example, I explained that when my children hear me say I love their mother, it can never have the amount of impact on them as when they actually see me loving her. I then gave several examples from everyday life concerning what people see when they look at how members of

various families treat each other, especially in public. I ended the introduction with a consideration of the way we, as human beings, treat the members of our families, since that tells people what kind of families we are a part of. I then made the connection between how we treat our biological family members and the way that ought to influence how we treat the members of our spiritual (i.e., church) family.

I transitioned from the introduction into Jesus command in John 13:34-35 where he said to his disciples, “Love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” I went on to explain that the way we treat one another within our church family tells those outside the Christian faith whether or not we are truly Jesus’ disciples. I also explained that love among Christians is more than simply being affectionate and friendly toward each other. Rather, it is a readiness to sacrifice anything and everything that we hold dear for the sake of our brother or sister. I emphasized the idea that, as Christians, we must always be ready to release into the hand a brother or sister our dearest treasures. I noted that when non-Christians witness that kind of commitment and willingness to sacrifice for one another, then those non-Christians would know that we are Jesus’ disciples.

I ended the sermon by asking those in the audience to pray that evening and to ask God to bring someone to their mind who might be blessed by something they could give them, or something they could do for them. Then I added that if God did, in fact, bring a brother or sister to mind, I asked them to consider giving that item or doing that kindness to that person as a sign of their love for that person. The reaction of my listeners to this challenge was very encouraging, since many of them commented on it at various times throughout the following week.

### **Sermon 3**

The third sermon came from 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11 and the subject was *encouraging one another*. The introduction to this sermon described *pessimism* as an attitude that is prevalent today. I gave several examples from various areas of life where people tend to be pessimistic. For example, some people tend to be pessimistic about the nation's economy, their marriage, the direction of their lives, the direction of their church, and so forth, and I discussed how pessimism can be devastating to a person's motivation. I also explained that one's pessimistic attitude likely comes from his or her inability to predict the future. This inability tends to cause a person to consider what he or she has experienced which, since we live in a sin-damaged society, has very often been negative. I went on to explain that Jesus knows this about us, and that, if we are not careful, we can fall into the trap of being overly pessimistic. But the truth is that Jesus cannot have his people thinking negatively about life, especially their Christian lives. Therefore, we must guard ourselves against allowing pessimism to destroy our spiritual motivation.

After the introduction, I opened the exposition with the Apostle Paul's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, where he wrote to members of the Thessalonian church and told them that they should "encourage one another and build each other up." I placed this command in direct opposition to the attitude of pessimism, and explained how being pessimistic can tend to ruin motivation even toward things like good works. On the other hand, I also explained that being encouraging can actually inspire our Christian brothers and sisters to remain steadfast, as well as give them confidence in their walk with the Lord.

I concluded the sermon by asking those in the audience to think of a person they either do not know very well, or, perhaps, have not gotten along with, and to think of some way they could encourage that person. I, then, challenged the audience to actually perform that encouragement during the following week and to expect their relationship with that person to change for the better.

#### **Sermon 4**

The text I choose for the fourth sermon was Galatians 6:1-2, and the topic was *restoring one another*. I introduced this sermon by discussing the pros and cons of a competitive attitude. I used various twists on old sports quotes that my coaches used to tell to the teams I played on. Quotes like, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s whether you win,” and “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” Then I explained how that kind of attitude is not only displayed in sports, but also in life. To prove the point, I used popular quotes, such as, “Nice guys finish last,” “Always look out for number one,” “Only the strong survive,” and “It’s every man for himself.” I then explained how that kind of attitude drives a lot of people to look for weaknesses or failures in the lives of their peers in order to gain an advantage over them. Then I explained how this kind of thinking is unbiblical and, therefore, unchristian, and must not be allowed to germinate inside the church.

Following the introduction, I presented the text of Galatians 6:1-2, where the Apostle Paul explained how Christians are to treat a brother or sister who has fallen into sin. It appears that Paul believed that even Christians could exhibit some spiritual weakness or moral failure similar to that of non-Christians. His point was that the mature believers within a church family should seek to restore a fallen brother or sister, instead

of burdening the person's conscience more than it, likely, already was. He suggested that restoration takes place when we help a brother or sister carry the weight of guilt and shame he or she experiences after repentance. During the course of the sermon, I explained that it is possible for Christians to bring into their church family relationship those secular attitudes which say, "Have no pity, because only the strong survive," and apply it to Christianity. I explained that when that happens, it can lead to a superiority complex, which was precisely what Paul was arguing against. Therefore, when these Christians notice that one of their brothers or sisters has fallen into sin and is experiencing shame and guilt because of it, those Christians can tend to be very harsh in their judgment. I mentioned that that is probably the reason the church has gained the reputation of being the only army in the world that kills its wounded. I also explained how Paul's directive can help correct that attitude.

I ended the sermon with another challenge. I asked those in the audience to think of someone in their church family who could use their help in overcoming some situation that caused them to feel defeated or ashamed, and I asked them to consider helping the person carry that burden.

## **Sermon 5**

The fifth sermon in the series came from 1 Corinthians 1:10 and was on the topic of *agreeing with one another*. I began the sermon with a discussion of some of the problems associated with a dysfunctional family. I explained how I grew up in a dysfunctional family where my parents often disagreed with one another on crucial issues. I explained how those disagreements became worse over the years and eventually led to the divorce of my mother and father. I explained how that same pattern can

manifest in the church and how it can lead to similar devastating effects. I explained how failing to agree on crucial issues within the church can, and often does, lead church members to “divorce” one another.

I then began an exposition of 1 Corinthians 1:10 in which the Apostle Paul warns that division within the church comes from disagreements between members of the church family. Paul wrote that in order to curtail church division, members of a church family should “agree with one another.” My first point was to emphasize that Paul was not talking about trivial agreements, and he was certainly not talking about things we would term “personal preferences” (i.e., tri-fold vs. bi-fold bulletins, brands of coffee, Christmas decorations, and so forth). Rather, he had in mind that Christians need to agree on concepts that are integral to the Christian faith. Such concepts would include what we believe concerning Jesus’ deity, mankind’s depravity, mankind’s need of vicarious redemption, the resurrection of the dead, the Trinity, and so forth. My point was that if a church is going to be functional, its members must be in agreement on the essentials of the faith. On this point I appealed to the principle in Mark 12:25 where Jesus said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.” I emphasized that anything other than the essentials of the Christian faith equates to mere personal preference, and personal preference should never be allowed to divide a church family.

I concluded this sermon with an appeal to the members of the audience to think of something they did not like about the service, the church building, or something the congregation was or was not doing, and I asked them not to talk about it with anyone for two weeks. During those two weeks, I asked them to think really hard about whether or

not that thing was worth dividing the church family over. If, at the end of the two weeks, they determined it was worth dividing the church over, I asked them to pray that God would intervene and help the leadership change it. However, if they determined that it was not worth dividing the church over, I asked them to consider letting the thing go for the sake of unity within the church family.

## **Sermon 6**

The sixth sermon in the series came from Colossians 3:15-17 and was on the topic of *teaching and admonishing one another*. I began the sermon by introducing someone I encountered while I was in the military. This person was what is referred to as a “barracks lawyer.” I described the barracks lawyer as a typical “know it all,” that is, someone who seems to know at least something about everything and is always willing to teach what he knows to anybody and everybody, whether they want to hear what he has to say or not. I then proceeded to quote an old saying among educators that says, “You cannot teach what you do not really know.” In other words, unless a person has gained a certain amount of competent knowledge in a subject either by means of formal education, life-experience, or self-study, that person cannot teach others about the subject. I then made the point that when it comes to the Christian faith we should only teach others what we ourselves are well acquainted with.

Following the introduction, I explained Colossians 3:15-17 emphasizing verse 16a, which speaks about knowing God’s word well enough to teach and admonish others with all wisdom. My point was simply that, as Christians, we cannot, or at least should not, expect to give instruction or warning to someone, until we commit ourselves to becoming students of “the word of Christ.” I suggested that it would be impossible, not

to mention, foolish, to attempt to teach one another “in all wisdom,” if we did not know the subject we were trying to teach.

The sermon ended with a challenge. The challenge was for my listeners to choose at least one subject and to learn it so well that they would feel confident teaching it to others by means of both instruction and admonition. I asked them to imagine what it would be like to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.”

### **Sermon 7**

The seventh sermon in the series was on the topic was *sowing and reaping*. The text for the sermon was Galatians 6:9-10. The sermon began with examples of reaching a goal by means of enduring various troubling situations. The idea was that if a person believes that a specific goal is worth the trouble of laboring and struggling, he or she is likely to be willing to do whatever it takes to reach it. The antithesis of that idea, however, is also likely to be true.

After the introduction, I explained the Apostle Paul’s words in Galatians 6:9-10, in which he wrote concerning the principle of sowing and reaping, in which he described doing good to everybody, but *especially* doing good to those who are within one’s church family. The point was that if Christians continue to do good to one another, in God’s time (which is rarely ever ours), they would reap a spiritual harvest. The emphasis of the message was on doing good to everyone, but “especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” This should be evident, since Christians, of all people, ought to be looking out for, and doing good to, the members of the family of God.

The sermon concluded with a challenge to my listeners to think of some good deed they had been doing for someone in the church that seemed to be showing no sign

of positive payoff. The challenge I gave them was to stop looking at the temporal circumstances and instead begin looking with the eyes of faith toward the goal of the good thing they were doing. I then emphasized that a key responsibility of Christians is to do good to those in the family of the faith.

### **Sermon 8**

The eighth sermon came from 1 John 1:5-7 and the topic of *fellowshipping with one another*. I introduced the sermon by giving an example of people who claim to be part of an elite organization of which they had never really been a part. The point of the introduction was to suggest that simply because someone says he or she has the right to enter into fellowship with an exclusive group, does not guarantee that he or she really has that right. I then made the point that many people claim to be part of God's family who are not. Then I asked if any of us could possibly fall into that same category.

After introducing the sermon, I began an exposition of 1 John 1:5-7 in which the Apostle John wrote about how Christians can know they are living in God's light. The point of message was that if someone only claims to be part of God's family but never lives according to the truth of the Christian faith, he or she has no right to claim either the fellowship of others within the family, or the purification from sin that John describes in the passage.

The conclusion of the sermon was a challenge to the listeners to examine themselves to ensure that they were really in the faith. By doing a realistic evaluation of the moral pattern of their lives, I suggested that they could know if they truly were a genuine member of God's family and, therefore, had the right to claim fellowship with God and his people.

## **Sermon 9**

The ninth sermon in the series was about *spurring one another on toward love and good deeds*. The passage was Hebrews 10:24-25, and I introduced the sermon by describing certain situations where doing the right thing sometimes takes outside motivation. Then I made the point that that concept holds true for Christians as well as non-Christians. The goal of the introduction was answer the question: Where does the outside motivation for a Christian originate?

I then began an exposition of Hebrews 10:24-25 in which the author encourages Christians to motivate one another toward love and good deeds. In other words, with regard to Christians, the motivation to do the right thing is supposed to come from other Christians. However, I also noted that if Christians neglect to meet together as the passage says, they will certainly lose their God-ordained source of outside motivation.

The sermon concluded with a challenge. Sometime through the following week I asked those in the audience to think of someone they knew who was struggling with a moral dilemma, and then to think of a way they could motivate that person to do the right thing (i.e., the biblical thing).

## **Sermon 10**

The tenth sermon in the series came from Galatians 5:13-15 and was on the topic of *servicing one another*. I introduced the sermon giving examples of long-term commitments people make that they later regret. The point of introduction is that, typically speaking, people prefer freedom to obligation. Then I asked how a Christian's desire to remain free can coincide with his or her obligation to obey God.

After the introduction, I began the exposition of Galatians 5:13-15 where the Apostle Paul spoke of Christian's being free, yet also being under obligation to serve their brothers and sisters within their local church family. The point was that Christian freedom is not freedom to do as one pleases. Instead, it is freedom to enslave oneself to God and others.

The sermon ended with a challenge to my listeners. I asked them to pray to God and ask him to show them a way they could serve one another. And if God did show them a way, I asked them to consider actually doing it.

### **Sermon 11**

The final sermon in the series was on the subject of loving one another. While this sermon covered the same subject as a previous sermon, I considered it to be such an important topic that I wanted to revisit it. The passage for the sermon was 1 John 3:16 where the Apostle John indicated that love for one's Christian brother was a chief indicator of his or her salvation. I introduced the sermon by giving various examples of why it is often better to have someone show how to do something rather than simply tell how to do it.

After the introduction, I began explaining 1 John 3:16 where John wrote, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." The point of sermon was that God did not simply tell Christians that they must love each other, instead, he showed them. I went on to explain that this verse was the preface for verse 17 where Jesus gave an example of love when he talked about laying down one's life for a brother, without actually dying physically. With that example, he taught that there is a sacrificial element to love.

The sermon concluded with another challenge. I discussed how, in today's world, Christian "love" is often misunderstood as mere friendship, or social tolerance. I explained that that idea was far from the biblical idea of love, yet it is an idea that is prevalent in many churches today. Furthermore, I added that, in our day, the word "love" seems to have become little more than a Christian buzz word. I then challenged my listeners to think of a way they could show their love to one another by actually doing something (i.e., sacrificing something), and then, actually doing it.

### **The Sermon Application Group**

The sermon application group was the vehicle of this project. Since the point of the project was to use the sermon application group as an experimental model for DPC's future discipleship training program, the method I developed for both forming the group and holding the weekly meetings had to be simple and repeatable. The success of the project, as I saw it, hinged on my ability to conduct the group in a consistent fashion throughout the eleven-week portion of the project. Following is the method I used to develop the group.

Once the 12 volunteers had completed the Pre-Project Survey, I formed them into the sermon application group which resembled what many churches today call a home group, cell group, or small group. The members of the group met once per week on each Wednesday evening during the eleven-week portion of the project. The primary purpose of the group's meetings was not to fellowship, or to engage in Bible study, it was to discuss possible life applications of the sermons they heard during each Sunday of the project's eleven-week portion. The group met in one of the church's adult classrooms for approximately 75 minutes.

## **Conducting the Meetings**

Each meeting began with prayer and a brief review of the previous Sunday's sermon. Before beginning the discussion, the group's members spent several minutes reflecting on the details of the various events they had experienced during the previous week. This exercise was designed to help the group's members focus on the real life situations they had recently encountered in preparation for the discussion of how the sermon could be applied to those events. We performed this exercise at the beginning of each meeting in order to help avoid haphazard and unrelated discussions, as well as to encourage everyone to begin thinking in terms of contextualization. This one exercise seemed to set the stage for the sessions and prepared even the more introverted members of the group for participation in the discussion. By performing this exercise, I found, to my surprise, that the introverted members of group actually became more vocal than I had anticipated.

During the project, the group experimented with different settings. We began the first few meetings with everyone sitting at tables with chairs facing forward and with me conducting the meeting from the front of the room and standing behind a lectern. The second setting was with everyone in a circle facing one another with me seated as part of the circle. While I thought the second setting would be better for the group's discussion, it was actually the classroom-type setting that became the most comfortable for our purposes.

The actual discussion lasted anywhere from 75 to 85 minutes depending on the mood of the participants and the progress of the discussion. In only one or two meetings did every member of the group share his or her personal life experiences from the

previous week. In fact, at most meetings only about five or six individuals shared how the previous Sunday's sermon impacted a specific situation they had experienced the previous week. However, everyone in the group was able to share an experience from his or her life in at least one of the meetings during the project. To end each week's session, the group leader would ask one of the group's members to pray and then he would dismiss the group.

For the occasional times when participants could not attend the Sunday morning sermon due to illness, work, or for some undisclosed reason, he or she had the opportunity to listen to the previous Sunday's sermon online at the church's website prior to the Wednesday evening discussion.<sup>1</sup> I did, however, require each participant to attend at least nine of the eleven meetings in order to count his or her surveys and leader evaluations as part of the final project evaluation.

### **Developing the Leaders**

Developing future sermon application group leaders was an essential part of the project. Since I viewed leader development as one of the most important of all the aspects of the project, I put a lot of time and mental energy into developing the method for training those who led the group during the project. Having chosen only two lay leaders to participate, I viewed their training as a critical part of the project since these individuals would be the ones who would potentially lead sermon application groups as part of DPC's future discipleship training program. Following is the method I used for the project.

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<sup>1</sup>Audio for each sermon in the project's sermon series was available at [www.depccrossroads.com](http://www.depccrossroads.com) (accessed March 24, 2014).

I led the group for the first three weeks. I began by reviewing the previous Sunday's sermon and asking open-ended questions which led into the group's discussion. At these meetings, the two lay leaders were to observe the way in which I conducted the sermon review and began the discussion. During those meetings, both men simply participated with the rest of the group in the discussion. The purpose of their observations was to get a sense for how I expected them to lead the group and to instill in them some amount of confidence which I determined was necessary if they were to help the group's members apply sermon content to their lives. After the three week observation period, the two lay leaders took turns leading the group's discussion. During that time, my participation was limited to making clarifications to the sermon review, observing the lay leaders, and participating in the group discussions.

Each lay leader led the group four times. At the end of their fourth session, the group's participants anonymously evaluated the leader using the project's Leader Evaluation Form.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, these were subjective evaluations on the part of the participants, but I had a two-fold purpose for requiring them. First, it helped me gather necessary insight into how well the group's members thought the leader connected with the group both by his temperament and by his teaching style. Second, it helped me understand how to better assist the leader in the area of small group leadership. After each meeting, the lay leader and I would wait until the group's participants left the building then we sat and discussed his experience and talked about possible ways he could improve his leadership of the group. We also discussed ideas that both of us might use to help the group's members improve their skills at contextualizing the sermons they

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<sup>2</sup>See appendix 2 for the project's Leader Evaluation Form.

heard. These were valuable sessions that helped both the lay leader and me discover better ways to help the group.

### **Phase 3: After-Project Administration**

The final phase of the project was primarily administrative. On March 26, the group held its final sermon application discussion. The following week, I met with the participants one final time and conducted an informal discussion which gave the participants an opportunity to voice their observations and offer possible ways we could improve the group in the future. After the discussion, I administered the Post-Project Survey and the Project Viability Survey. I then collected the surveys, thanked the group's members for their participation, and offered a prayer. After dismissing the participants, I began reviewing the project's data.

By the final week, I had analyzed all of the group member's Pre and Post-Project surveys, their Leader Evaluation forms and their Project Viability Surveys. The results of the data contained in the surveys and forms appear in appendices at the end of this work.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the project was to form a sermon application group and to use the group as an experimental model for determining the possible direction of discipleship training at DPC. In the course of the project, I found the sermon application group model to be an outstanding example of what a discipleship training program could be.

Concerning the development of the sermon application group, I could not think of a better way as a pastor and preacher to build a deeper relationship with members of my congregation while, at the same time, significantly impacting their lives with God's

word than to develop a program in which they could intentionally apply the content of my sermons to their life situations. Therefore, the eleven sermons I preached during the course of the project became, for me, one of the most rewarding experiences I have had during my time in pastoral ministry.

Furthermore, conducting this project gave me an invaluable opportunity to “listen-in” as the members of the group discussed their unique life experiences with one another and as they helped one another apply God’s word directly to the day-to-day situations they were experiencing. The opportunity to participate as a fellow disciple with several members of my congregation was worth both the time and the effort it took to prepare the sermons and to conduct the project. In fact, as relieved as I was to be finished with the project, I do not regret choosing the sermon application group as the topic for this project and would choose it again, if I had the opportunity.

CHAPTER 5  
PROJECT EVALUATION

**Introduction**

The intent of this project was to affirm the importance of biblical application in the day-to-day lives of the participants in my Doctor of Ministry project. The idea for the project came in three phases. First, there was my understanding of what the difference between forensic justification and progressive sanctification.<sup>1</sup> As I understood it, the biblical idea of justification is a one-time legal declaration of God that pardons the sins of a believing sinner while, at the same time, imputing the righteousness of Jesus to him or her. According to the Bible, justification is a *one-time act*. Progressive sanctification, on the other hand, is *not* a one-time act. Instead, progressive sanctification is a process in which the believing sinner cooperates with the Holy Spirit in becoming conformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus (Rom 8:29).

The difference between these two doctrines became a motivation for the project. It was my perception of the need for the justified sinners in my spiritual care to begin cooperating more fully with the Holy Spirit in progressive sanctification. My plan was to do this by teaching them to apply biblical principles to their unique life situations.

The second phase that helped generate the idea for this project was Jesus' discussion of application in Matthew 7:24-27. In that passage, Jesus explained how important it was for his disciples to apply what they heard in the course of his teaching to

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<sup>1</sup>See the discussion in chap 2.

their everyday lives. This idea, coupled with Jesus' prayer on behalf of his disciples in John 17, where he asked God the Father to sanctify them by the truth of his word. These two passages suggested that the application of God's word was the primary means of cooperating with the Holy Spirit in progressive sanctification. As a side-note, Jesus' brother, James, offered a similar message in his epistle (see Jas 1:21-22).

The final phase that ultimately led to the project was the discovery of Jesus' use of a small group model to train his inner circle of disciples (see Mark 3:18-23 and Matt 13:3-9). As I understood Jesus' methodology, he chose what I am calling a sermon application group as a way to ensure that his disciples learned to apply his teaching to their lives. As a result, and since I could not think of a better way to do it, I determined to follow his model.

Putting the above three phases together is how I determined the idea for this project. How well I succeeded in replicating Jesus' model is the point of this chapter.

In the following pages I present a seven-step analysis of the project. This analysis will include an evaluation of the purpose, goals, methodology, strengths, and weaknesses of the project. It will provide theological and personal reflections, as well as some concluding remarks.

### **Evaluation of the Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to organize a select group of church members into a sermon application group and to use this group as a potential model for my church's future discipleship training program. As discussed in the introduction to this work, the lack of any meaningful discipleship at DPC was, in my opinion, glaring. This lack necessitated the immediate pursuit of an experimental model that would help me

develop an effective and practical discipleship training program for the church's members. Since the intention of the project was to form a model of discipleship that emphasized the teaching element of Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19-20, an obvious choice for that model was a sermon application group. The intention of the project was for this group to serve as a kind of laboratory to see if the project's participants could develop as disciples of Jesus.

The purpose of the project can be divided into two parts: (1) forming the sermon application group; and (2) using the group as a potential model for DPC's future discipleship training program. Evaluating the first part of the purpose is fairly straight forward. Twelve of DPC's members volunteered to participate in an eleven-week sermon application group. These volunteers took surveys both before and after the project which indicated their understanding of sermon application as well as their ability to apply sermon content to their individual life situations.<sup>2</sup> These participants met together each week for eleven weeks to discuss possible ways the project's sermons might apply to their lives. This part of the purpose was fulfilled prior to the beginning of the eleven week portion of the project.

The second part of the purpose is more difficult to evaluate. As I saw it, I needed to find an effective and practical discipleship training model that emphasized the teaching element of Jesus' Great Commission. The sermon application group was the model I chose. As far as I can tell from the data I have analyzed and the positive feedback from the project's participants, this model has earned at least an opportunity to become DPC's discipleship training program.

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<sup>2</sup>Analysis of the data from both the pre and post-project surveys can be found in the section titled "Evaluating the Methodology of the Project" in this chapter.

Based on the evaluation above, I believe the purpose of the project was valid. I also believe part one of the purpose was fulfilled by the beginning of the project and that the second part will likely be fulfilled in the near future.

### **Evaluation of the Goals**

I understand that in most endeavors setting goals is important. Personal observations can provide some benefit, but when it comes to evaluating the success or failure of a project such as the one I conducted, setting objective, measurable goals is surely a good thing. In the introduction to this work, I set forth three goals which I believed to be objective and therefore measurable. I will use this section to evaluate those goals in order to determine whether or not I have achieved them.

The first goal was to help members of the sermon application group improve their ability to apply sermon content to their unique life situations. The pre- and post-project data suggests that the majority of the project's participants did, in fact, improve their ability to contextualize (i.e., to apply to their specific life circumstances) the content of the sermons they heard during the project's eleven week sermon series. However, this goal failed to receive the required 50 percent change in positive responses between the pre and post-project surveys. Based on this lack of positive change, I was forced to evaluate this goal as only somewhat unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup>

Following are some representative examples from the pre- and post-project surveys. Question 1 demonstrated a shift in several participants' understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This shift was demonstrated by a 23.07 percent increase in the number of "strongly agree" responses between the pre- and post-project surveys.

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix 2 for pre- and post-project survey results.

In other words, a significantly greater number of participants indicated that by the end of the project they understood what it means to be a disciple of Jesus better than they did at the project’s beginning. Furthermore, all 12 of the participants agreed that they understood what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. I consider that to be a positive trend which was a direct result of the project.

Table 1. Responses to question 1: I understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	3	20%	13	86.66%
Agree	8	53.33%	2	13.33%
Agree Somewhat	4	26.66%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Question 12 also saw significant change. According to the responses to question 12, each participant revealed what he or she believed about the task of contextualizing sermon content and how it applied to the various situations that had arisen in his or her life. The answers the participants gave revealed a 60 percent positive increase by those who had marked “Disagree Somewhat” and “Agree Somewhat” to this question on the pre-project survey. As a pastor, this was an especially pleasant surprise, since the first goal of the project was to help members of the sermon application group

improve their ability to apply sermon content. In fact, question 12 was one of the keys to project, since I believe it represented the basic concept behind what I consider to be a functional discipleship training program. In my opinion, the fact that there was such a significant swing in an objectively positive direction revealed the discipleship training potential of the sermon application group model.

Table 2. Responses to question 12: I am proficient at applying the biblical principles from my pastor’s sermons to the various situations that arise in my life

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0%	10	66.66%
Agree	4	26.66%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	6	40%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	5	33.33%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Question 15 measured whether or not the participants enjoyed offering their insights into sermon application in relation to the other participants in the group. I also found the participant’s responses to this question especially encouraging, since nearly 50 percent of them indicated a positive change in their enjoyment with sharing insights into how other Christians could apply sermon content to their lives. Like question 12, question 15 was especially important, since it represented a key element that revealed the functionality of a small group discipleship training model.

Table 3. Responses to question 15: I enjoy offering my insights into how other Christians can apply the biblical principles from my pastor’s sermons to their lives

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	2	13.33%	4	26.66%
Agree	4	26.66%	9	60%
Agree Somewhat	5	33.33%	2	13.33%
Disagree Somewhat	4	26.66%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

According to the percentage of change in Table 3, it is apparent that the group’s members found the small group setting comfortable enough to participate in the weekly discussion. Once they became used to the discussion format, they all seemed to enjoy sharing their thoughts with one another. Like the results demonstrated in Table 2 above, the results in Table 3 were also quite encouraging.

Further data demonstrated the near success of the project’s first goal and is contained in Appendix 2. The reader should give special consideration to Tables A8 through A11, since these indicate the participants’ basic understanding of their purpose in the project. Throughout the eleven weeks of the sermon series, I attempted to keep in the forefront of the participants’ minds that their chief purpose was to meet in a small group setting for the sole purpose of seeking life specific applications from the content of the sermons they heard during the course of the project.

The second goal of the project was to provide practical training for future sermon application group leaders. My primary concern in setting this goal was to prepare at least one lay-leader who could lead a sermon application group in the event that DPC chose to use this model as its discipleship training program.

According to my evaluation, this goal was successful. One of the two lay leaders was very well received by the group and his leader evaluations bore this out. The other, however, was not well received. To be blunt, the second leader was not very good at leading the group's discussion. I do not believe it was for a lack of trying on his part. But as it turned out, the group's members simply judged that he did not have the necessary gifts for small group leadership. The group's judgment was born out by their Leader Evaluation Forms. For analysis of those forms, please see Appendix 3.

The third goal of the project was to determine the viability of using sermon application groups as the church's primary discipleship training program. This goal was by far the least objective of the three goals. It was, however, very important in determining whether or not DPC would pursue sermon application groups as its primary discipleship training program.

Determining the success of this goal was accomplished simply by offering a post-project survey which would determine whether or not the participants would be willing to participate in future sermon application groups. The criteria for implementing the program as modeled in the project, was simple. If more than 50 percent of the participants indicated a willingness to continue in future sermon application groups, then this model would form the primary discipleship training program at DPC. If, however, there was less than 50 percent, I would revisit and reformulate the design and

methodology of the program, which for all intents and purposes, would be to return to the proverbial “drawing board.”

According to the surveys, 100 percent of the participants indicated their willingness to participate in future sermon application groups. This, I admit, was extremely encouraging to me, as well as humbling. The reason I make this admission is simply because it means that all of the effort and planning that went into conducting this project over the last three years, actually paid off. DPC needed a workable discipleship training program that its members could be excited about, and 15 percent of the church’s one hundred active members believe that sermon application groups are a viable option to make that program a reality. The reader can find the results of the Project Viability Surveys in Appendix 4. The reader should pay particular attention to Figure 1, since it has a direct bearing on the success of the project’s third goal.

### **Evaluation of the Methodology**

Evaluating the methodology focused on the project’s three phases. Phase 1 consisted of three parts: (1) recruiting the volunteers that formed the sermon application group; (2) informing the members of the group about the duration and intent of the project; and (3) administering the pre-project survey. Phase 2 consisted of eleven weeks in which I preached a sermon series specifically designed to generate ideas for individual life applications. I then met with the members of the group once per week on Wednesday evenings in order to discuss possible applications of each sermon and offered advice to the group’s members concerning how they might apply the content of the sermons to their unique life circumstances. During this phase I led the group’s discussions for the first three weeks. Then, during the next eight weeks, the two lay leaders took turns

leading the group's discussions while I observed and participated along with the group. After each session I met with the lay leader to offer my input concerning how he might improve his small group leadership and discussion skills. I also collected written evaluations from the group's members in order to obtain data which would determine whether or not the leader was competent to lead a future application group. In the final phase, I administered the Post-Project Survey and the Project Viability Survey and evaluated the data collected during the course of the project.

The methodology for phase one was fairly straight forward and consisted of two parts. Part one was the recruitment of the project's participants. To accomplish this part of the phase, on a Sunday morning, after the worship service, I simply made an announcement asking for volunteers from among the members of the congregation who would be willing to participate in an eleven-week discipleship training project. The recruitment of the volunteers was a smooth process with almost immediate consent from each of the 12 volunteers.

The second part of phase 1 was administering the Pre-Project Survey. This part of the phase also proceeded without raising major issues or causing complaints from the participants. To accomplish this part of the phase, I handed out the surveys and gave instructions on how to mark the responses. There was no time limit given for the completion of the surveys. While there were no major problems with the methodology of administering the survey, there was one thing I would do differently with regard to the initial instructions I gave. In hindsight, I would have informed the participants of my intention to compare the answers they would mark on the Pre-Project Survey with those they would mark on the same survey at the end of the project. I am persuaded that the

participants were unclear as to the role of the Pre-Project Survey and their responses may have been slightly skewed because of it. In other words, by not explaining to the participants that they would be taking the same survey at the end of the project, I may have opened the way for some of them to mark what they thought were the answers I wanted to see, instead of presenting a realistic assessment of their own thoughts. Since there was very little percentage change on several of the responses between the Pre and Post-Project Surveys, I think this may have been the case. I view this result to be a methodological failure on my part, since I did not clarify the project's surveying procedure prior to them taking the initial survey.

Phase 2 dominated more time and generated more data than either of the other two phases. Phase 2 consisted of the eleven-week sermon series and the conducting of the weekly discussions. This phase proceeded as expected and without raising any major concerns.

The methodology for conducting this phase was as follows: Each Wednesday evening, following the Sunday morning sermon, the members of the sermon application group gathered in one of the church's adult classrooms to discuss possible ways the sermon's content could be applied to the specific life circumstances of the group's members. This discussion lasted between 75 and 85 minutes, and the meeting began and ended with prayer. Since the purpose of this phase was simply for me to preach the eleven sermons in the series, conduct the group's meetings, and train and evaluate the lay leaders, I am persuaded that I accomplished what I intended to accomplish in this phase. Therefore, the methodology the methodology I used during this phase I would evaluate as successful.

Phase 3 of the project was primarily administrative and evaluative. During this phase I conducted an informal group discussion, administered the Post-Project and Project Viability Surveys, and evaluated the project's data. The methodology for conducting the informal group discussion was simply to gather the participants and ask them if they had any ideas concerning how I could improve the group. Unfortunately, the group's members did not offer very many suggestions and, in fact, they all seemed to like the model we used during the eleven-week portion of the project. Therefore, I consider the suggestions offered to be of a trivial nature and, therefore, they had no significance for the project.

The methodology for administering the Post-Project and Project Viability Surveys was simple. I distributed the two surveys and allowed enough time for each participant to complete them and ask any questions they might have regarding the various questions they encountered.

The methodology for evaluating the project's data was fairly straight forward. I began by totaling all of the responses to each question in the Pre-Project Survey and writing those totals in separate columns on a sheet of paper. I, then, repeated this process for the responses to the Post-Project Survey. Then, using a percentage calculator, I determined the variance of percentage between the responses to both surveys and wrote the results in a graph for visual display and offered a simple conclusion to each question based on the percentage variance.

In order to evaluate the data for both the Project Viability Surveys and the Leader Evaluation Forms, the methodology I chose was to use a simple bar graph. I found that using a bar graph gave a much clearer representation of the data than offering

a percentage or using a pie chart. As a result, I was satisfied with the methodology used for evaluating and visually representing the data gathered from both the Leadership Evaluation Forms and the Project Viability Surveys.

### **Strengths**

The fundamental strength of the project was the fact that it met a critical need within the church in which the project was conducted. Due to a lack of any significant discipleship training at the church, the members of DPC were struggling in their understanding of what it means to be followers of Jesus. When I accepted the call to become DPC's pastor in August of 2012, the spiritual immaturity I observed among a significant number of the church's members was significant. After discussing with DPC's elders the various reasons for this deplorable spiritual condition, I immediately began to consider how best to remedy it. During my studies in how to apply the contents of an expository sermon to one's life, I had somewhat of a revelation for how to fix the maturity issue at DPC. That revelation had to do with discipleship training and the forming of a small group where applying the content of the Sunday morning sermon would be the curriculum for the group. Developing this small group model, I believe, was the fundamental strength of this project.

Something else which I consider to have been a strength was the fact that the group helped me as I studied for each week's sermon. Since I knew that members of the sermon application group would be analyzing, poking, probing, and discussing every detail of my sermons, it made me work that much harder at being simple and clear in my sermon outlines. I also knew that, since the focus of the project was sermon application, it would be important for me to concern myself with the relevance of the biblical

principle I was articulating in each sermon's proposition. As a preacher, this was an enormous help to me and one of the key strengths of the project. In fact, I also count my being almost compelled to simplify my sermons as one of the joys of the projects.

A final item which I consider to be a strength was getting to know some of my congregants more intimately. Since DPC was a new ministry field for me, it was important that I understand the joys and challenges that DPC's members were facing day-to-day. This project gave me that opportunity. During the course of the eleven weeks, I was able to "listen in" while members of the group shared their struggles and their victories, and this has become an enormous help to me in both pastoral care and sermon preparation.

### **Weaknesses**

I discovered a few weaknesses during the course of the project. The most glaring of them was that the group was too large. Twelve participants proved a few too many to have everyone benefit from the group's discussion. After several meetings, I found myself wondering if half the participants were even involved in the discussion. And since the main point of the project was sermon application, I found myself becoming a bit frustrated that more of the group could not participate, let alone go into detail concerning his or her life experiences. If I was to conduct this project again, I would either reduce the group to eight members, or divide the 12 members of the original group into two groups.

Another weakness, which was related to the first, was the usurping of the group by the extroverts. This was something I anticipated, but really had no plan for. During the course of the eleven weeks, I could have written on a piece of paper prior to

the meeting who would spontaneously join the discussion and who would need some cajoling. Fortunately, there were more extroverts in the group than introverts and once the extroverts realized they had the floor, it was tough to get the introverts involved. I think this issue would also be helped by reducing the size of the group, since then the leader could intervene more easily and help coax the introverts to engage in the discussion.

A final weakness had to do with the length of the sermon series. I think the group would have enjoyed applying sermons other than those from the “one another” texts. Eleven in a row was beginning to wear on some of the group’s members. In hindsight, I think it would have been just as effective if I would have preached on various subjects other than those in the series. Although, the group’s members did admit that the “one another” texts were very easy to apply to their lives. I think the glory of a sermon application group is its usefulness in engaging any passage of Scripture and with any topic. In fact, at several points during the project, the participants would bring up other Scriptures and begin applying them to their life situations, and they seemed to do it rather easily.

### **Theological Reflection**

Spiritual immaturity among the members of a particular church is a direct and negative reflection on that church’s minister. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands his ministers to make disciples. One way they are to do that is by teaching people to obey all that Jesus commanded. Unfortunately, at the church to which I was recently called, my predecessor did not fulfill this ministerial obligation. What I found when I arrived at DPC was a near absence of discipleship training. The result of that absence was a very

low threshold of practical theology and relevant doctrine among many of the church's members. It is a sad fact that several of the churches with which I have been involved over the past several years have been in the same or a similar condition. It seems that Jesus' followers are not being fed by their shepherd in a way that is relevant to their lives. And the results are spiritually malnourished congregations with members who simply do not know what they are to do with God's word.

It seems that spiritual immaturity is not a new problem. The writer of Hebrews offers a scathing rebuke to those who ought, after an extended time within Christ's church, to have matured, but whom he calls (in so many words), "spiritual infants." He writes, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:12-14). This author then goes on to warn against apostasy from the Christian faith, which seems to be a natural consequence of spiritual immaturity. This warning from the author of Hebrews ought to make today's ministers, at least, a little bit nervous, since we are the ones whom Jesus has commanded to make disciples out of his followers.

As I reflect on the theology that inspired this project, I am becoming more aware of the utter necessity of ministers finding the best possible discipleship training program for their congregations. I, for one, think that finding a program that will both train the followers of Jesus who are under my spiritual care and that will help me become a better, more competent, preacher, would be the best of all worlds. And I think I have

found that program in the form of a sermon application group.

Reflecting theologically on this project has reinforced in me the gravity of the minister's task. I cannot imagine a greater, more powerful, more humbling, occupation than to be called by the Lord Jesus Christ to disciple his people in the face of an unregenerate, critical, and spiritually hostile society. Speaking on this matter, the Apostle Paul had this to say about Jesus' ministers: "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor 2:15-17). As I reflect theologically on this project, I cannot help but repeat Paul's words as my own, "Who is sufficient for these things?" I am painfully aware that I certainly am not.

### **Personal Reflection**

As I reflect on how the project impacted me, personally, I will offer two points. First, the topic of the project has inspired me in a way that I did not expect. I will admit that at fifty years old, I have resigned myself to being a small church pastor. That resignation, however, does not exempt me from fulfilling my duty to disciple the few Christians that Jesus has placed in my spiritual care. My calling as a pastor will not allow me to skimp by when it comes to teaching the saints of God to live lives that are in conformity to Jesus' commands. Therefore, conducting the sermon application group at DPC has reenergized my passion for training disciples of Jesus. That is something I did not expect. I will also admit that, at first, performing this project was simply going to be a "check the box" fulfillment of just another requirement on my way through the

seminary's program, but I was surprised to discover that, along the way, doing this project really meant something both to me and to my little flock. I really am inspired by what I learned by developing and conducting a small group which was dedicated to sermon application, and not just the application of my sermons, but any sermon the members of the group might hear. That truly is inspiring.

The second point I offer as a personal reflection is that the topic of the project has inspired the project's participants in a way I did not expect. Since the day I formed the sermon application group, members of the group have often mentioned their excitement about studying the Bible with their pastor. Many have indicated that they can barely wait for Wednesdays to roll around so they can come to "class," as they call it. And if my secretary does not have Sunday's sermon posted on our website by Tuesday morning, she tells me she hears about it from members of my "group," as she calls it. I must admit, I did not expect the level of commitment and excitement that this project generated among the participants of the project.

### **Conclusion**

There are many reasons to conduct a project like the one described in this work. There is, however, only one argument that justifies those reasons. That argument is simply that Jesus commanded his ministers to make disciples (see Matt 28:19-20). And the way he instructed them to accomplish this task was by going to the nations, baptizing those who believe the gospel, and then teaching those baptized believers to obey everything Jesus had commanded. Therefore, apart from a serious effort to accomplish those tasks, Jesus' ministers would be negligent in honoring his command. That is something today's ministers cannot allow.

This project was an honest attempt to be faithful to Jesus. And since today's ministers are primarily concerned with the teaching element of disciple-making, they must endeavor to discover a workable and effective means for instructing the baptized believers under their spiritual care to obey what Jesus has commanded. It was the search for such a means that ultimately prompted me to undertake this project, and I do not regret the two years it took to complete it, or the four years it took to complete the program. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

APPENDIX 1

PRE- AND POST-PROJECT SURVEY

**Agreement to Participate**

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your understanding of Christian discipleship, and assess your ability to apply sermon content to your unique life circumstances. This research is being conducted by Anthony R. Reid for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be part of the sermon application group meetings and answer questions for the pre-sermon and post-sermon series. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

Please circle the number that best reflects your opinion in regard to each statement. Use the following scale to indicate your responses.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>DS</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>

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1. I understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
2. As a disciple, I believe I am responsible to learn what the Bible teaches.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
3. As a disciple, I believe I am required to obey what the Bible teaches.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
4. The Bible contains principles for how God expects me to live my life.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
5. I believe God intends for me to know the principles taught in the Bible.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA

6. I believe it is important to increase my ability to apply the principles taught in the Bible to my life.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
7. My pastor is at least partly responsible to ensure that I grow in my understanding of what the Bible teaches.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
8. My pastor is responsible to ensure that I grow in my ability to apply what the Bible teaches.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
9. My pastor's sermons play an important role in my understanding of what the Bible teaches.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
10. The content of my pastor's sermons clearly reveal principles taught in the Bible.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
11. I should allow the biblical principles contained in my pastor's sermons to guide how I live my life.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
12. I am proficient in applying the biblical principles from my pastor's sermons to the various situations that arise in my life.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
13. I enjoy listening to other Christians talk about how the biblical principles from my pastor's sermons apply to their lives.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
14. I enjoy sharing with other Christians how the biblical principles from my pastor's sermons apply to my life.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
15. I enjoy offering my insights into how other Christians can apply the biblical principles from my pastor's sermons to their lives.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA
16. I believe a small group environment is an effective place to discuss how to apply the biblical principles I learn from my pastor's sermons.  
SD            D            DS            AS            A            SA

APPENDIX 2

LEADER EVALUATION FORM

Please circle the number that best reflects your opinion in regard to each statement. Use the following scale to indicate your responses.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	
<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>DS</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	
1. The leader displays natural leadership ability.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2. The leader understands his role within the group.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3. The leader shows an enthusiastic willingness to lead the group.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4. The leader displays a better-than-average knowledge of biblical content.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. The leader clearly communicates his ideas to the group.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. The leader is wise in responding to problems within the group.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. The leader respects the ideas of the group's members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8. The leader keeps the discussion on topic.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. The group's members relate well to the leader.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

10. The leader understands the main points of the pastor's sermon.  
 SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA
11. The leader offers insight into possible ways the group's members can apply the biblical principles from the sermon to their lives.  
 SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA
12. The leader encourages open discussion of the pastor's sermon among the members of the group.  
 SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA
13. This leader would have no trouble leading a sermon application group without supervision.  
 SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA
14. This leader might benefit from working side-by-side with another leader.  
 SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA

APPENDIX 3

POST-PROJECT VIABILITY SURVEY

Please circle the number that best reflects your opinion in regard to each statement. Use the following scale to indicate your responses.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>DS</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>

---

1. There are better discipleship training programs than sermon application groups.

SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA

2. Our church should continue to explore other discipleship training programs.

SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA

3. I personally feel that future sermon application groups could serve as a vital component of our church's discipleship ministry.

SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA

4. I personally intend to participate in future sermon application groups.

SD      D      DS      AS      A      SA

\*(If you answered "agree" or "strongly agree" on the last two questions, please respond to question 5 in the space provided below.)

5. Based on your experience, briefly explain why you feel that sermon application groups should continue as part of DPC's discipleship training program.

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APPENDIX 4

PRE- AND POST-PROJECT SURVEY RESPONSES

Table A1. Responses Percentages to question 1: I understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	3	20%	13	86.66%
Agree	8	53.33%	2	13.33%
Agree Somewhat	4	26.66%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a 66.66% increase in the strongly agree category.

Table A2. Responses Percentages to question 2: As a disciple, I believe I am responsible to learn what the Bible teaches

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	8	53.33%	9	60%
Agree	4	26.66%	6	40%
Agree Somewhat	3	20%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was nearly a 20% positive change in those participants who had marked “Agree Somewhat” to this question in the pre-project survey.

Table A3. Responses Percentages to question 3: As a disciple,  
I believe I am required to obey what the Bible teaches

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	11	73.33%	12	80%
Agree	4	26.66%	3	20%
Agree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Conclusion: There was no significant increase or decrease.				

Table A4. Responses Percentages to question 4: The Bible contains  
principles for how God expects me to live

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	60%	11	73.33%
Agree	6	40%	4	26.66%
Agree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Conclusion: There was a slight increase (13.33%) in those who had marked “Strongly Agree” in post-project survey.				

Table A5. Responses Percentages to question 5: I believe God intends  
for me to know the principles taught in the Bible

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	60%	10	66.66%
Agree	6	40%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Conclusion: There was no significant increase or decrease.				

Table A6. Responses Percentages to question 6: I believe it is important to increase my ability to apply the principles taught in the Bible to my life

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	10	66.66%	12	80%
Agree	5	33.33%	3	20%
Agree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a 13.34% increase in those who believe it is important to increase their ability to apply biblical principles to their lives.

Table A7. Responses Percentages to question 7: My pastor is at least partly responsible to ensure that I grow in my understanding of what the Bible teaches

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	7	46.66%	7	46.66%
Agree	3	20%	3	20%
Agree Somewhat	5	33.33%	5	33.33%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: The answers were identical between the pre and post-project surveys.

Table A8. Responses Percentages to question 8: My pastor is responsible to ensure that I grow in my ability to apply what the Bible teaches

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	4	26.66%	4	26.66%
Agree	5	33.33%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	3	20%	4	26.66%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	3	20%	2	13.33%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was no significant change.

Table A9. Responses Percentages to question 9: My pastor’s sermons play an important role in my understanding of what the Bible teaches

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	60%	10	66.66%
Agree	5	33.33%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	1	6.66%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was no significant change.

Table A10. Responses Percentages to question 10: The content of my pastor’s sermons clearly reveal principles taught in the Bible

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	8	53.33%	12	80%
Agree	3	20%	3	20%
Agree Somewhat	4	26.66%	0	%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a 26.66% increase in “Strongly Agree” responses, which was the entire percentage of those who had marked “Agree Somewhat” in the pre-project survey.

Table A11. Responses Percentages to question 11: I should allow the biblical principles contained in my pastor’s sermons to guide how I live my life

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	8	53.33%	9	60%
Agree	6	40%	6	40%
Agree Somewhat	1	6.66%	0	%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was no significant increase or decrease.

Table A12. Responses Percentages to question 12: I am proficient at applying the biblical Principles from my pastor’s sermons to the various situations that arise in my life

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	0	0%	10	66.66%
Agree	4	26.66%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	6	40%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	5	33.33%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a very significant change (70.33%) in those who had marked either “Disagree Somewhat” or “Agree Somewhat” on the pre-project survey, but who marked either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” on the post-project survey.

Table A13. Responses Percentages to question 13: I enjoy listening to other Christians describe how the biblical principles from my pastor’s sermons apply to their lives

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	5	33.33%	8	53.33%
Agree	5	33.33%	7	46.66%
Agree Somewhat	5	33.33%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a 33.33% increase in positive responses to this question.

Table A14. Responses Percentages to question 14: I enjoy sharing with other Christians how the biblical principles from my pastor’s sermons apply to my life

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	6	40%	14	93.33%
Agree	7	46.66%	1	6.66%
Agree Somewhat	1	6.66%	0	0%
Disagree Somewhat	1	6.66%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was significant increase to this question.

Table A15. Responses Percentages to question 15: I enjoy offering my insights into how other Christians can apply the biblical principles from my pastor’s sermons to their lives

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	2	13.33%	4	26.66%
Agree	4	26.66%	9	60%
Agree Somewhat	5	33.33%	2	13.33%
Disagree Somewhat	4	26.66%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: The positive percentage changes from “Agree” to “Strongly Agree” (13.33%) and from “Disagree Somewhat” and “Agree Somewhat” to “Agree” (46%) were especially encouraging, as well as the 100% decrease in the “Disagree Somewhat” category.

Table A16. Responses Percentages to question 16: I believe a small group environment is an effective place to discuss how to apply the biblical principles I learn from my pastor’s sermons

Possible Responses	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	Respondents	Percentage	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	5	33.33%	9	60%
Agree	6	40%	5	33.33%
Agree Somewhat	4	26.66%	1	6.66%
Disagree Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%	0	0%

Conclusion: There was a 26.67% increase in “Strongly Agree” responses and a 20% decrease in those who “Agree Somewhat” responses.

APPENDIX 5

LEADER EVALUATION FORM RESPONSES

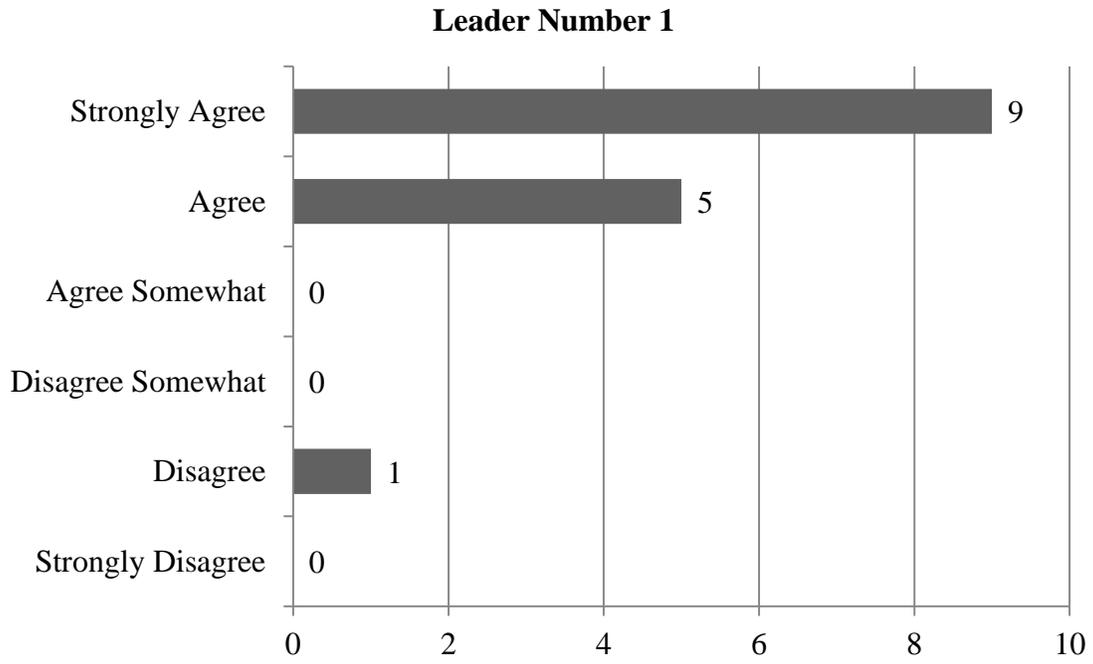


Figure A1. The Leader displays natural leadership ability

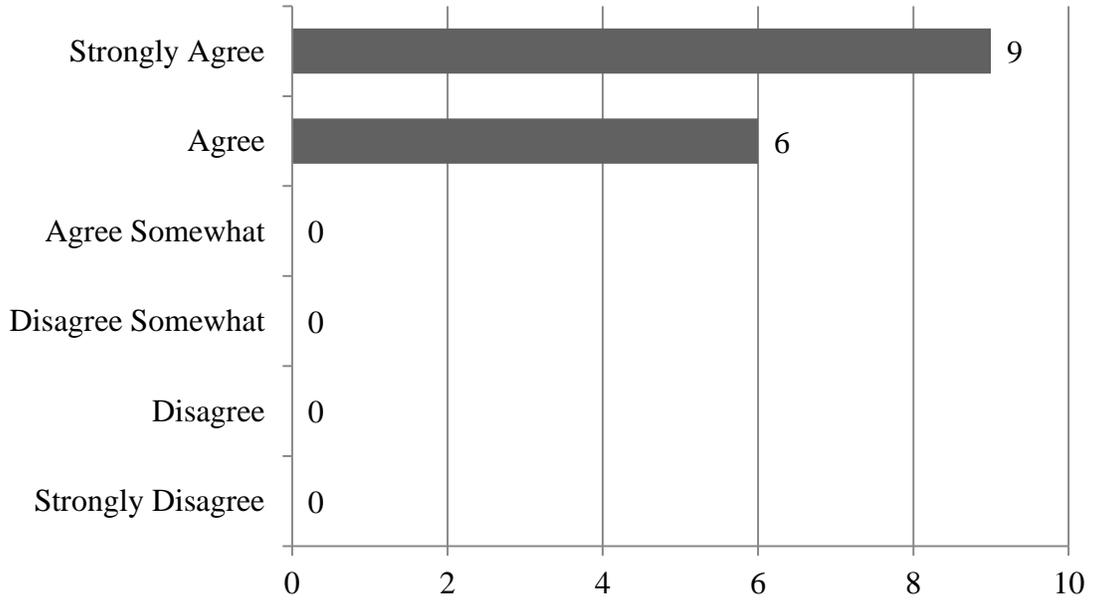


Figure A2. The leader understands his role within the group

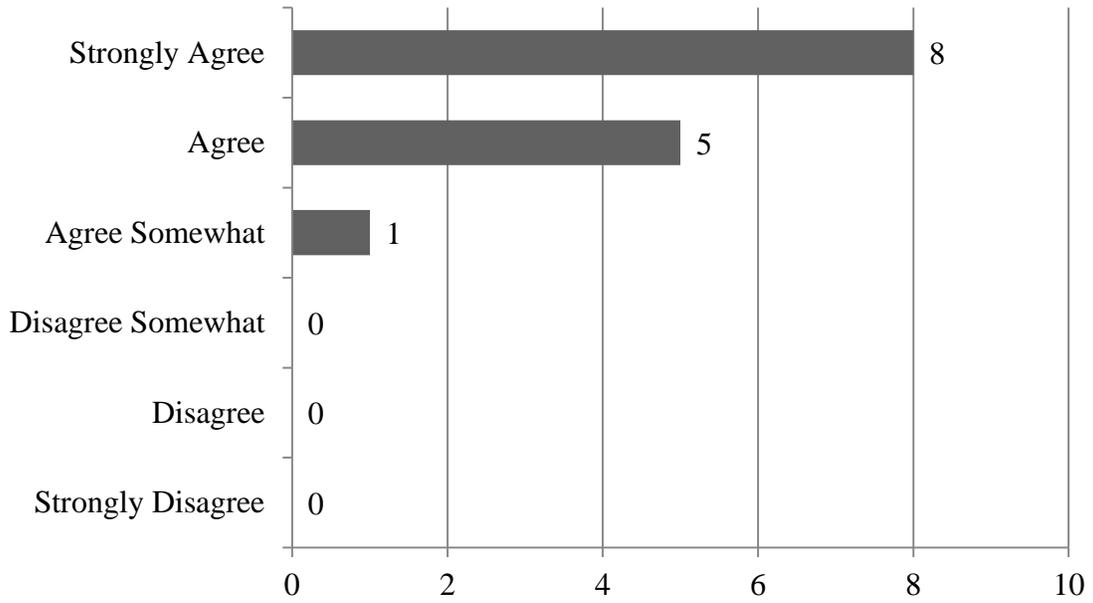


Figure A3. The leader shows an enthusiastic willingness to lead the group

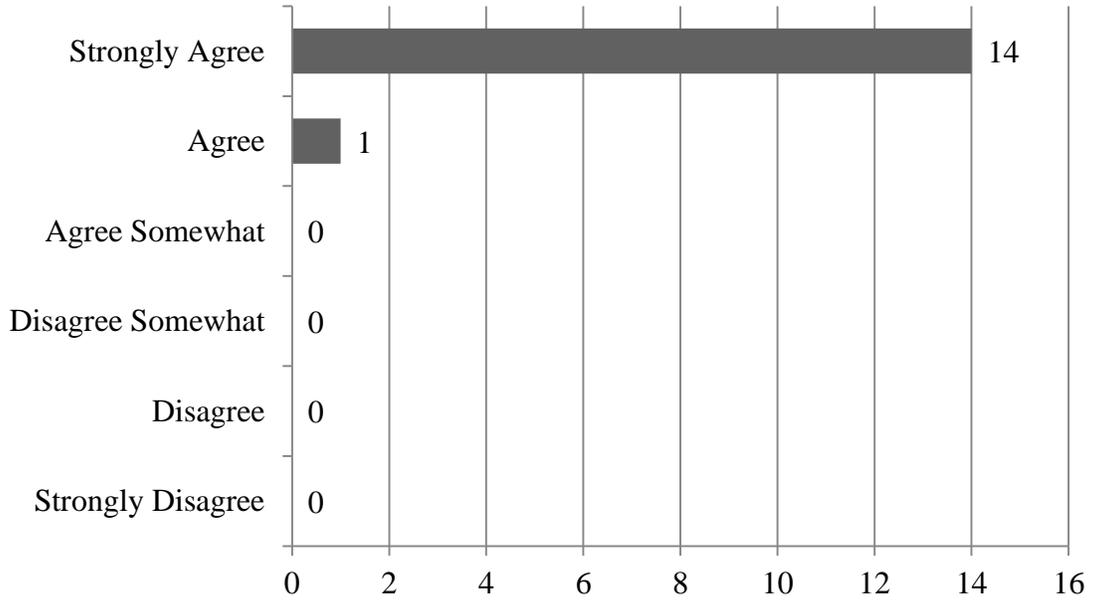


Figure A4. The leader displays a better-than-average knowledge of biblical content

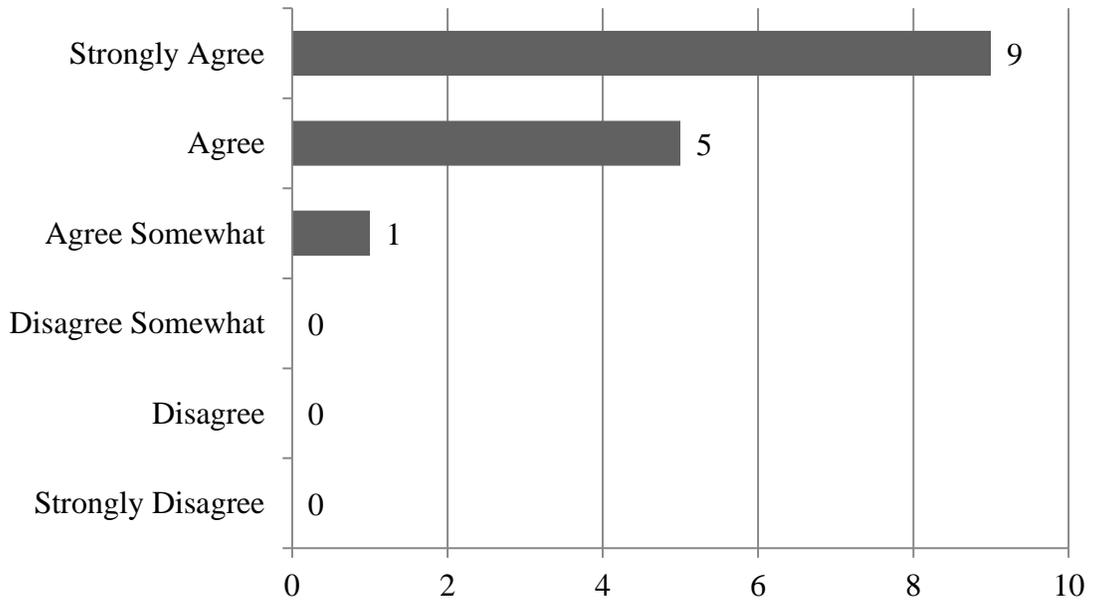


Figure A5. The leader clearly communicates his ideas to the group

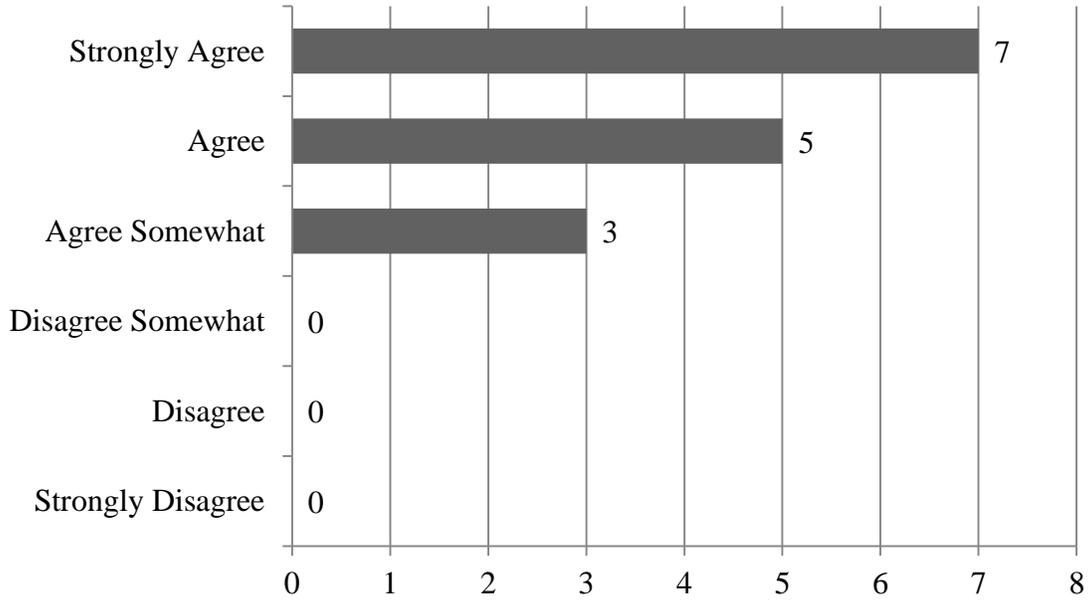


Figure A6. The leader is wise in responding to problems within the group

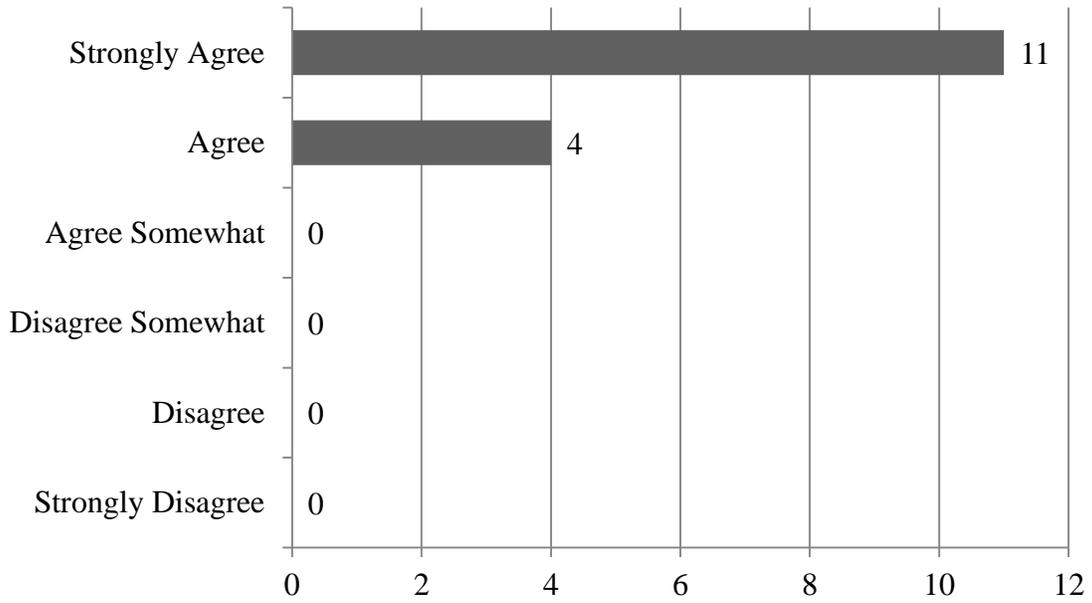


Figure A7. The leader respects the ideas of the group's members

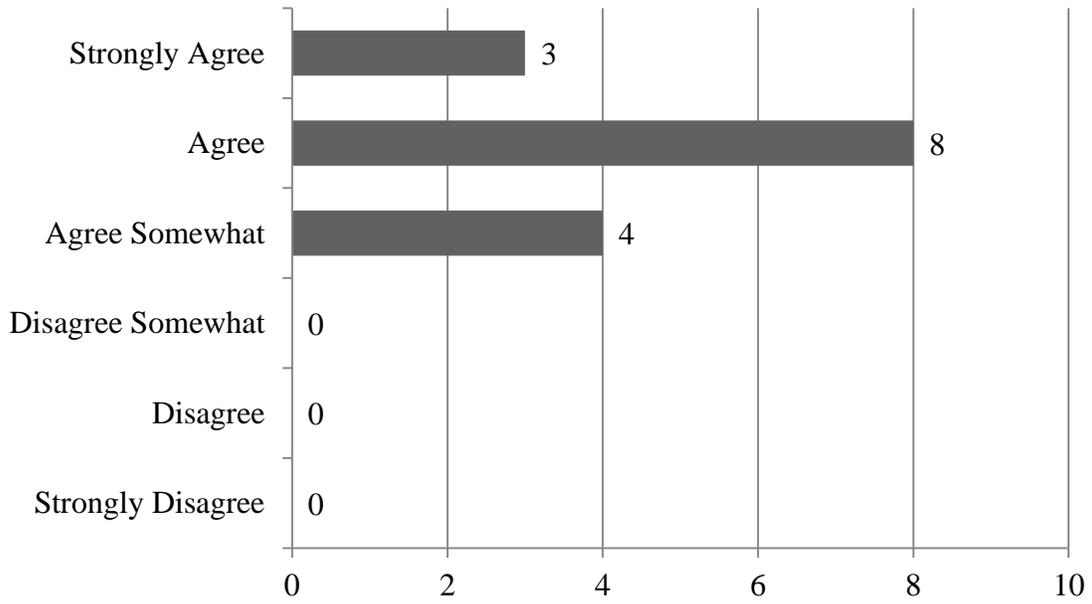


Figure A8. The leader keeps the discussion on topic

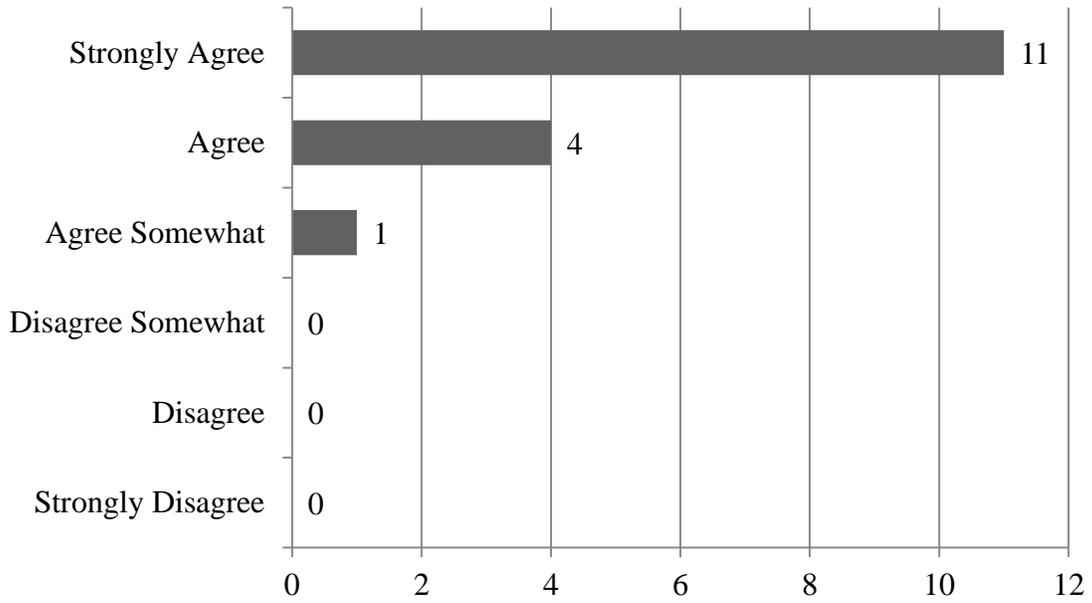


Figure A9. The group's members relate well to the leader

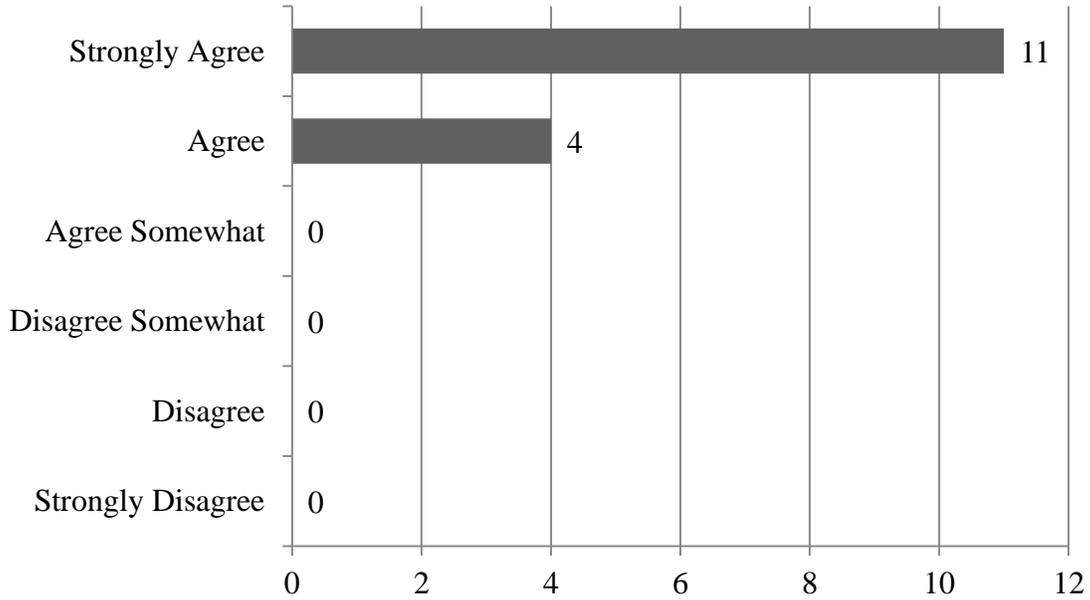


Figure A10. The leader understands the main point of the pastor's sermon

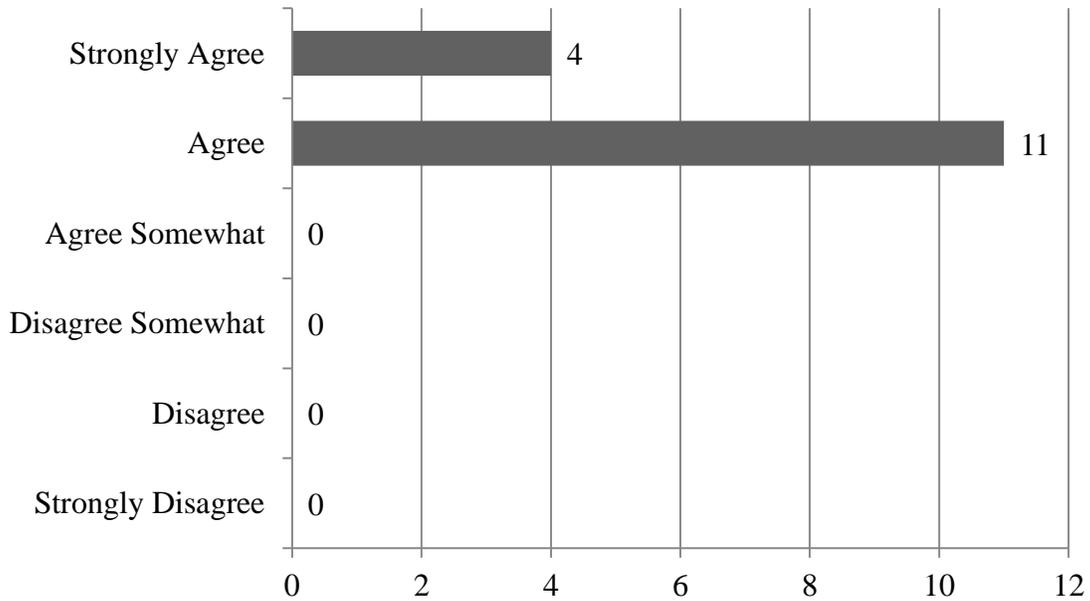


Figure A11. The leader offers insight into possible ways the group's members can apply the biblical principles from the pastor's sermon to their lives

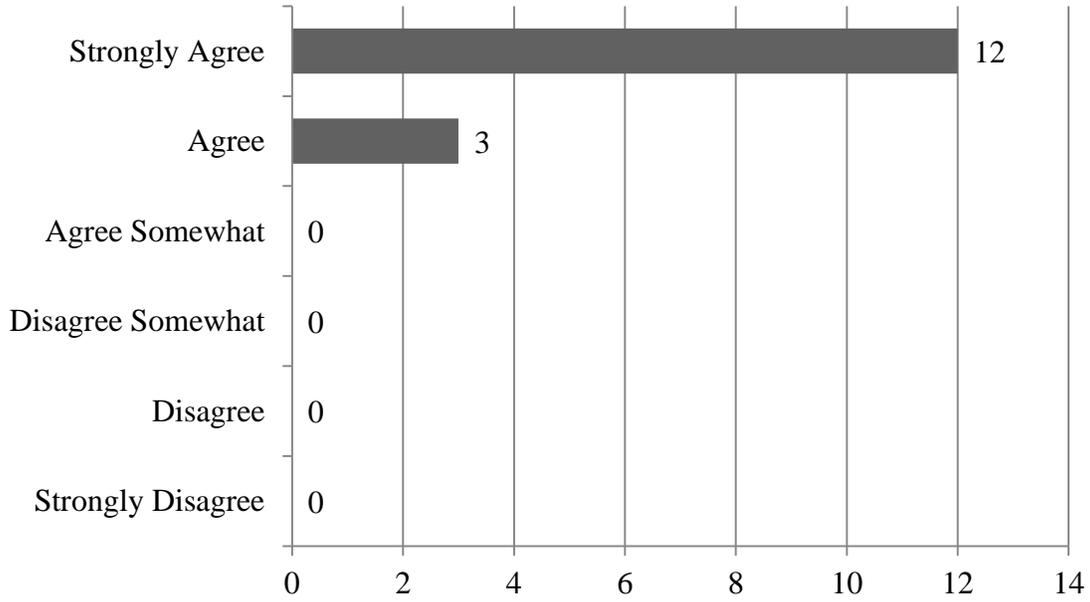


Figure A12. The leader encourages open discussion of the pastor's sermon among the members of the group

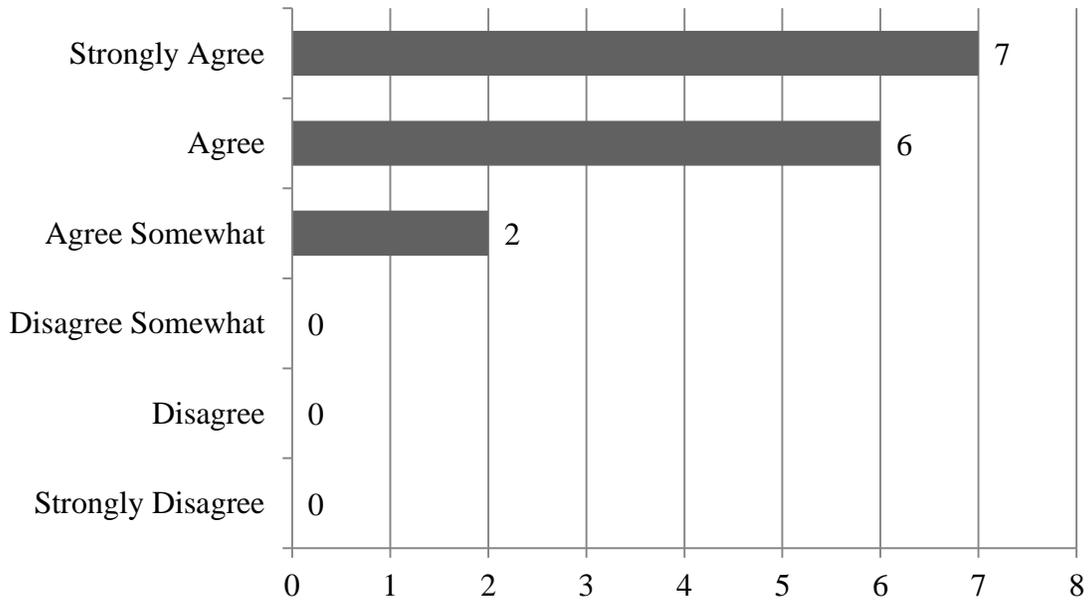


Figure A13. This leader would have no trouble leading a sermon application group without supervision

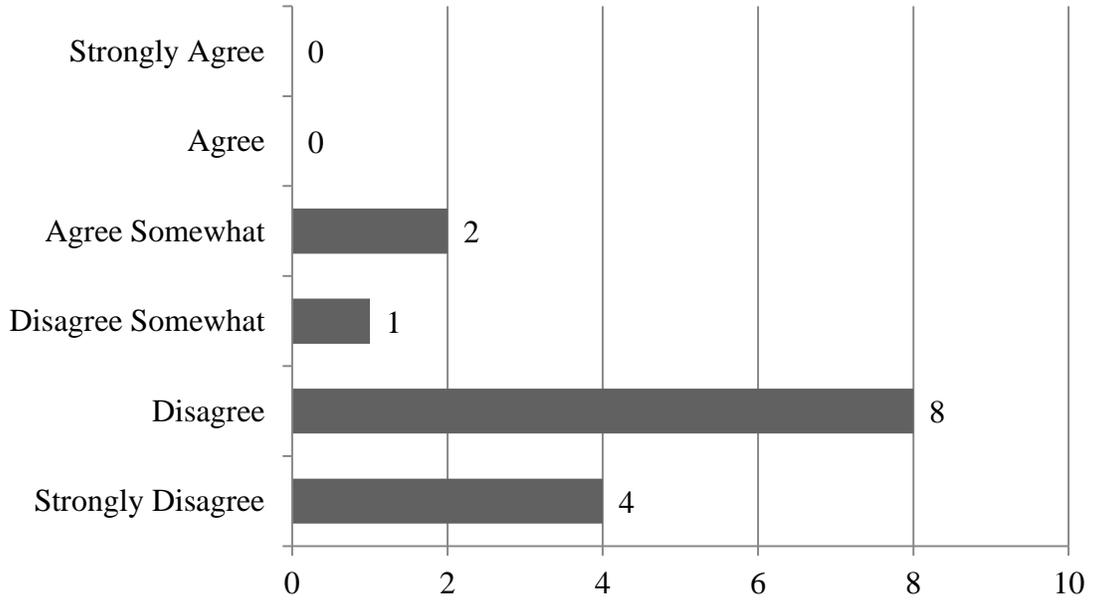


Figure A14. This leader might benefit from working side-by-side with another leader

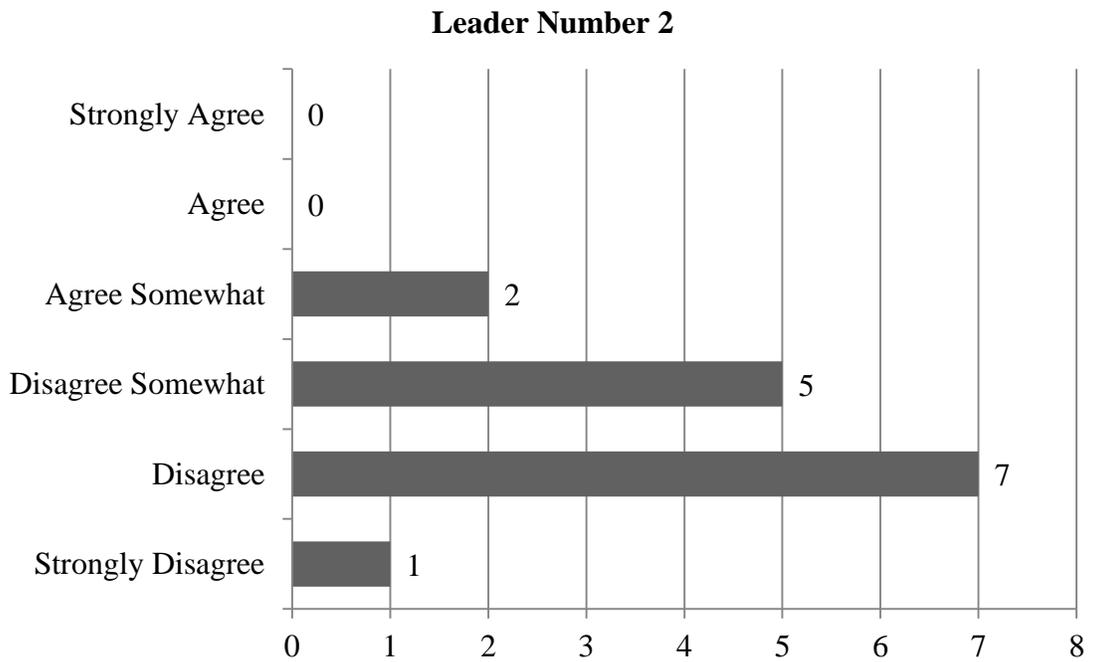


Figure A15. The Leader displays natural leadership ability

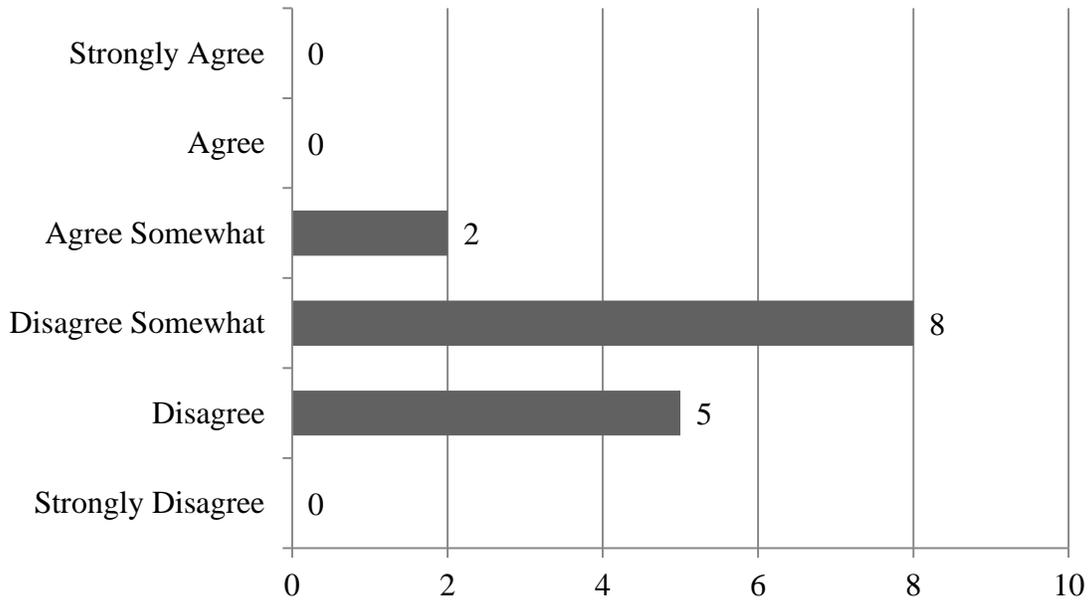


Figure A16. The leader understands his role within the group

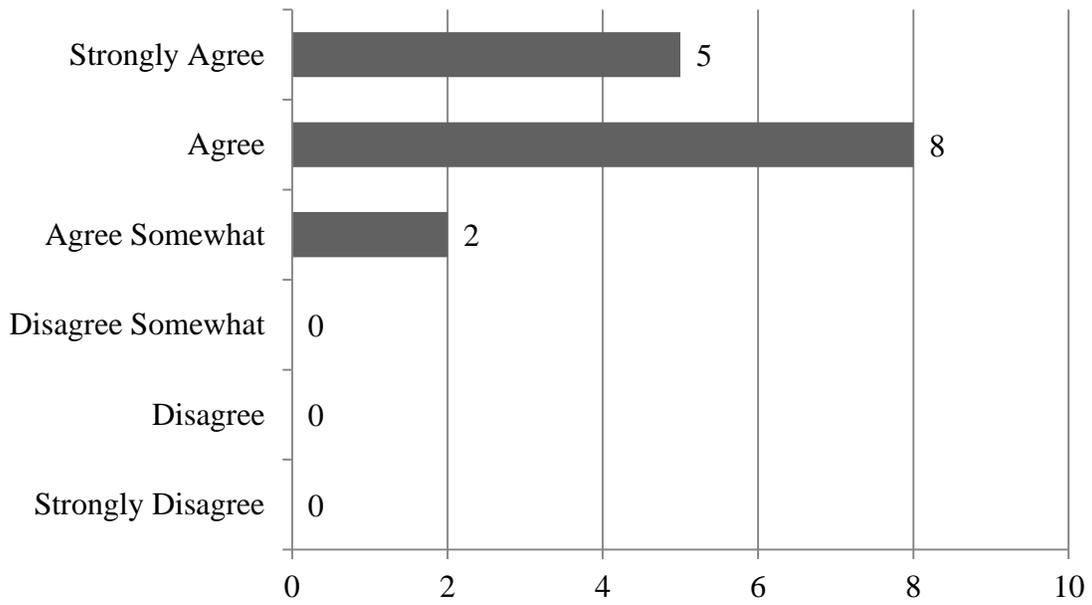


Figure A17. The leader shows an enthusiastic willingness to lead the group

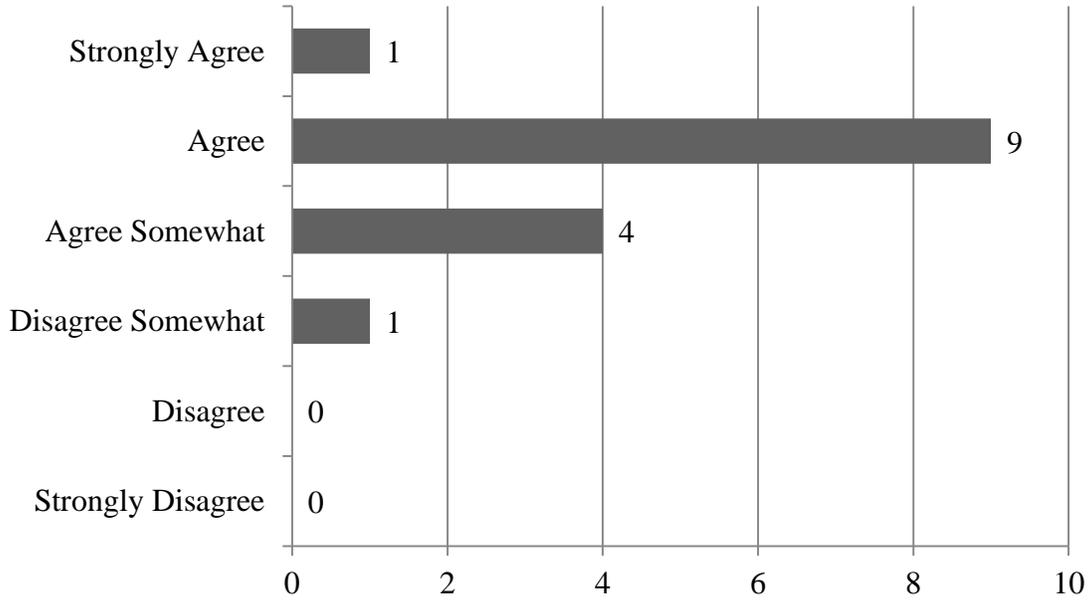


Figure A18. The leader displays a better-than-average knowledge of biblical content

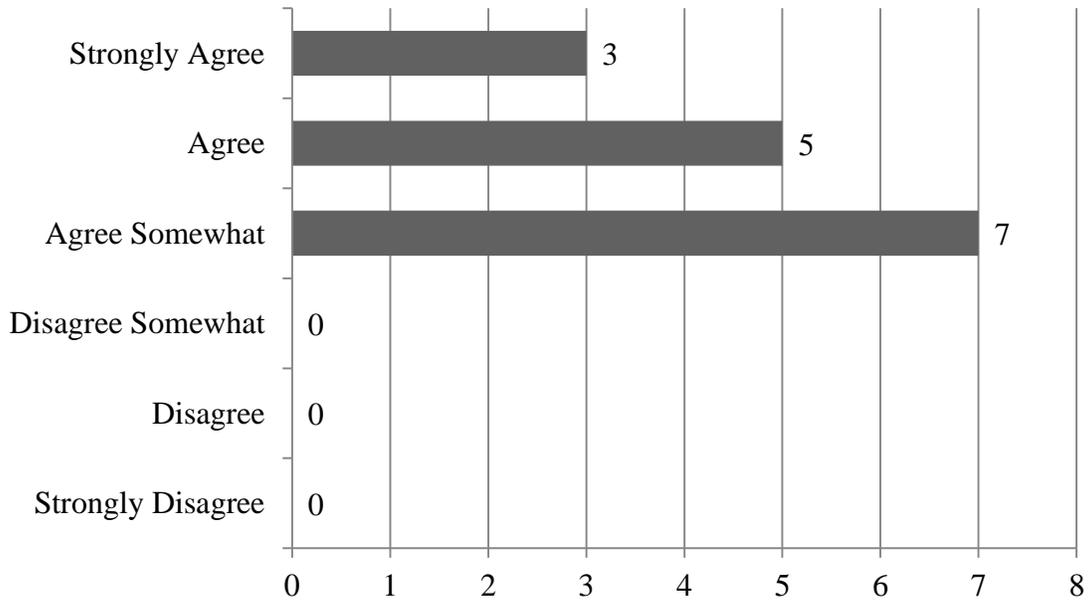


Figure A19. The leader clearly communicates his ideas to the group

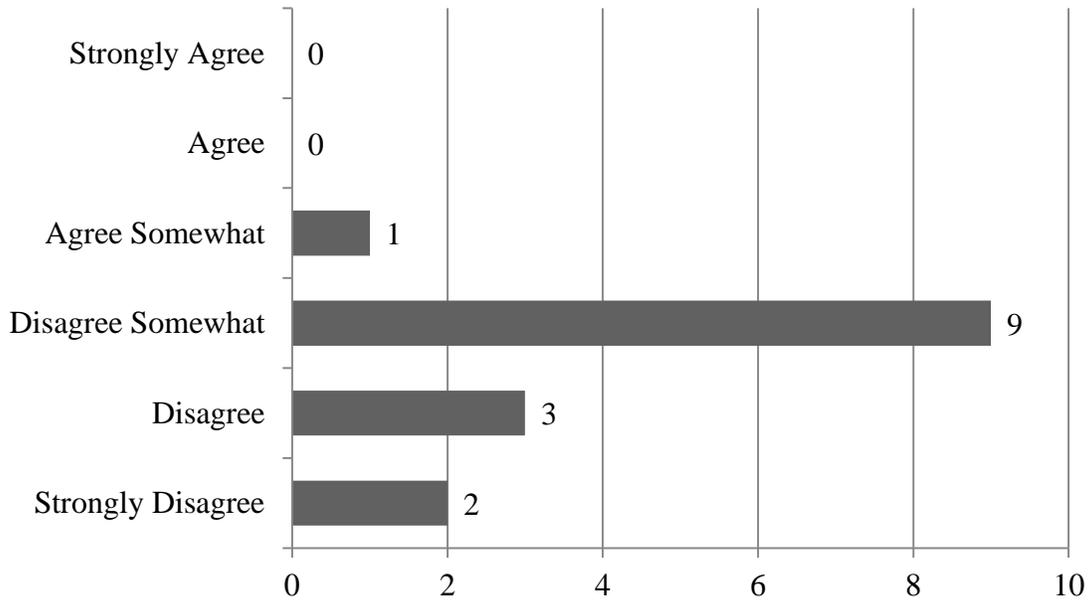


Figure A20. The leader is wise in responding to problems within the group

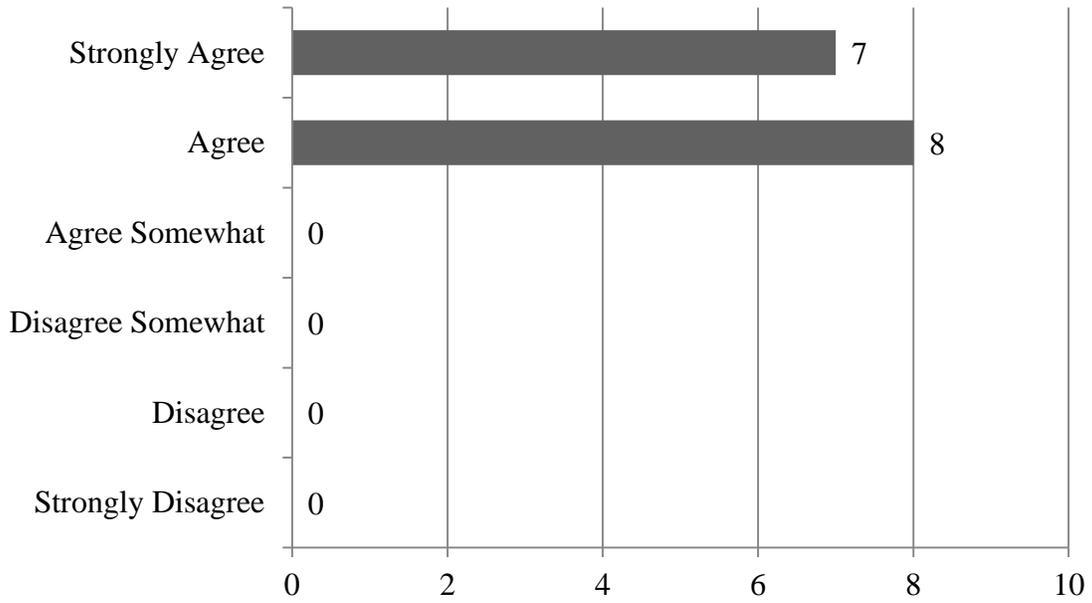


Figure A21. The leader respects the ideas of the group's members

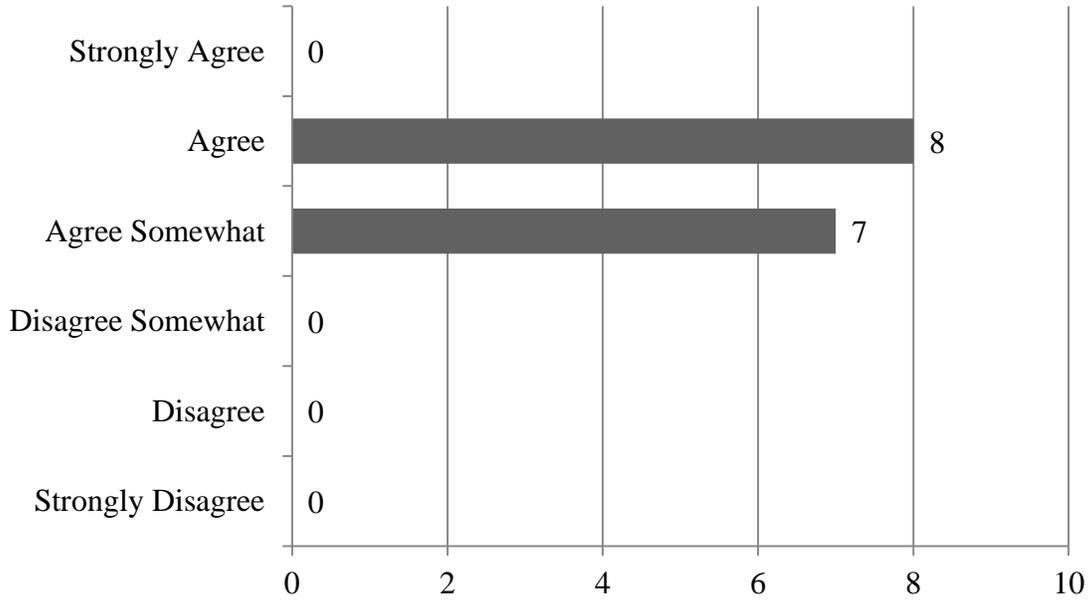


Figure A22. The leader keeps the discussion on topic

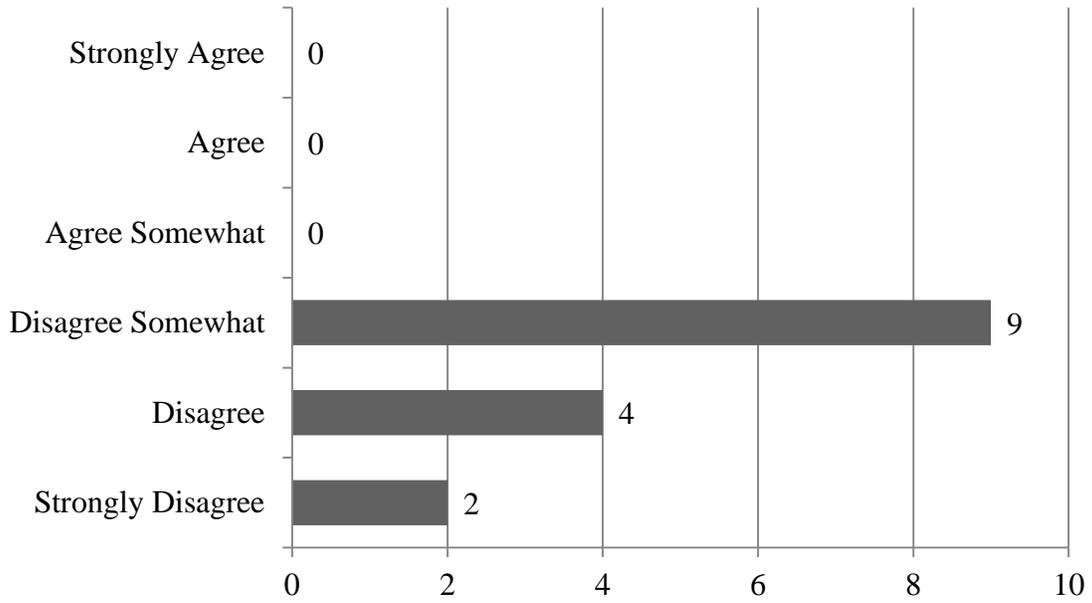


Figure A23. The group's members relate well to the leader

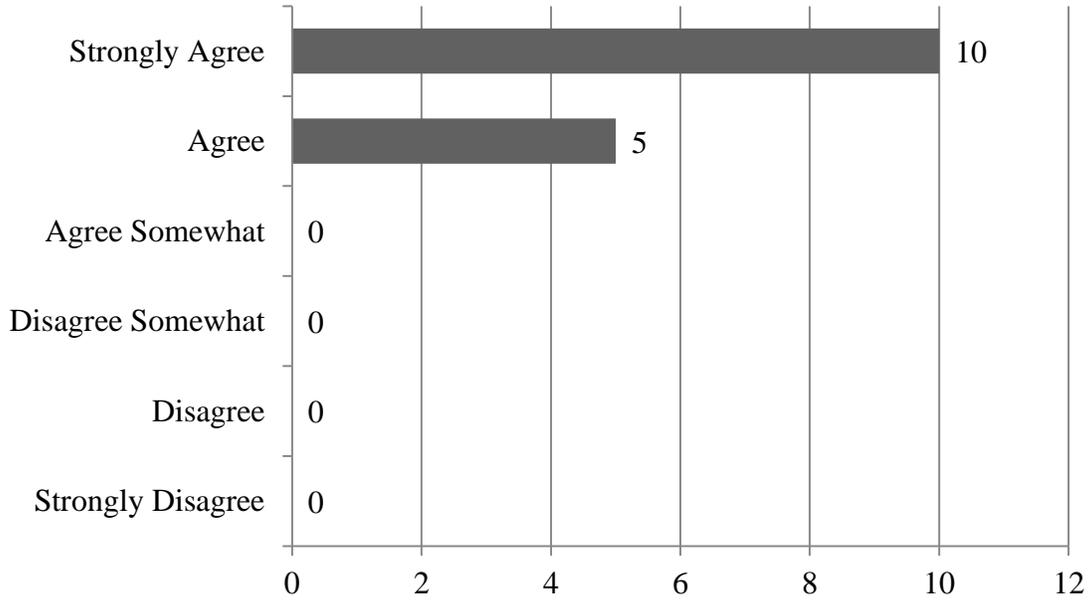


Figure A24. The leader understands the main point of the pastor's sermon

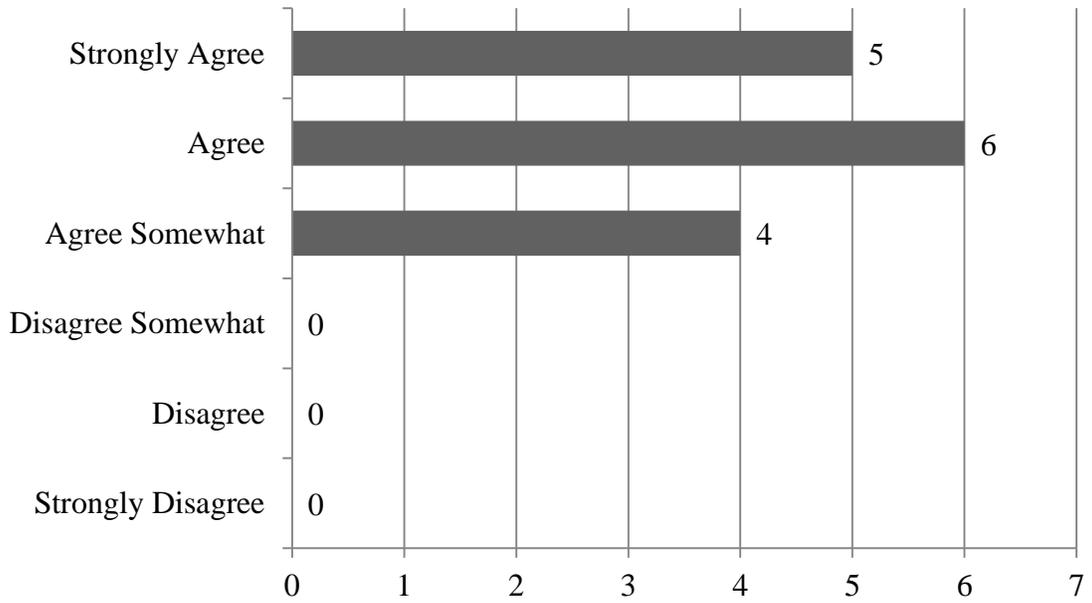


Figure A25. The leader offers insight into possible ways the group's members can apply the biblical principles from the pastor's sermon to their lives

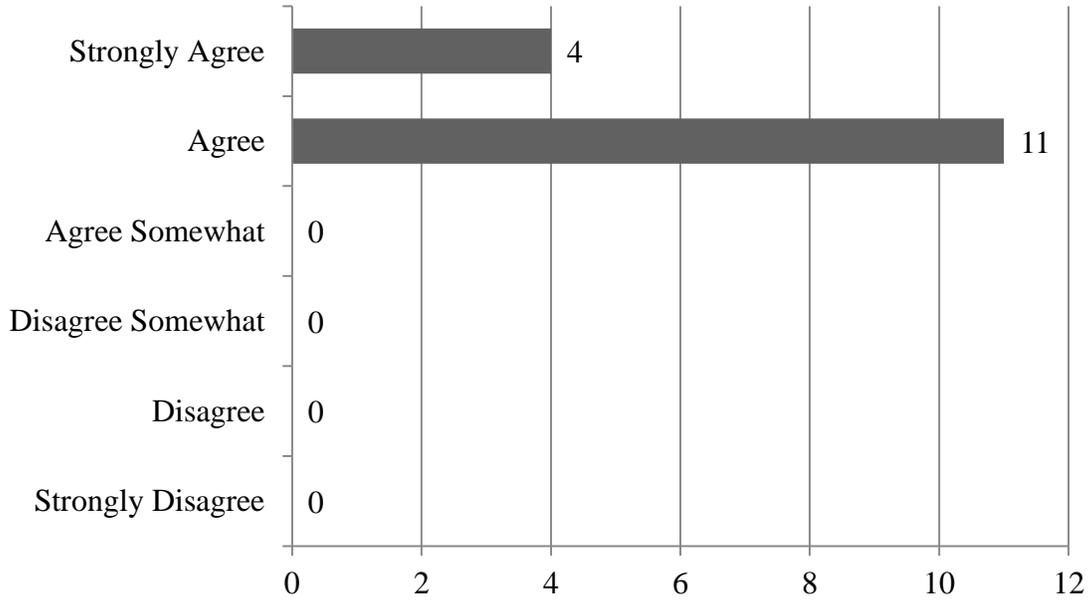


Figure A26. The leader encourages open discussion of the pastor's sermon among the members of the group

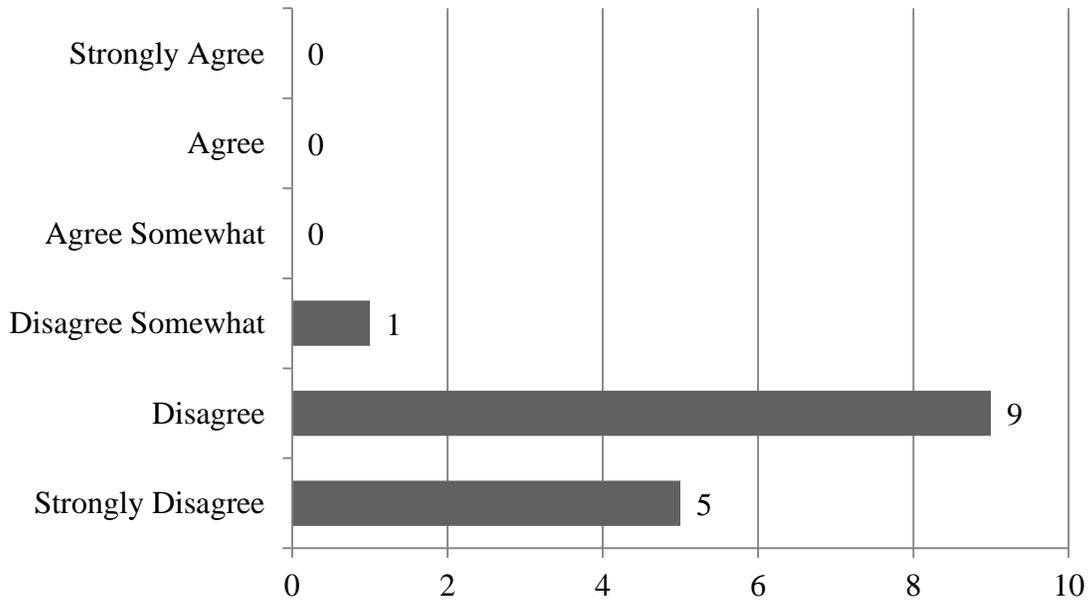


Figure A27. This leader would have no trouble leading a sermon application group without supervision

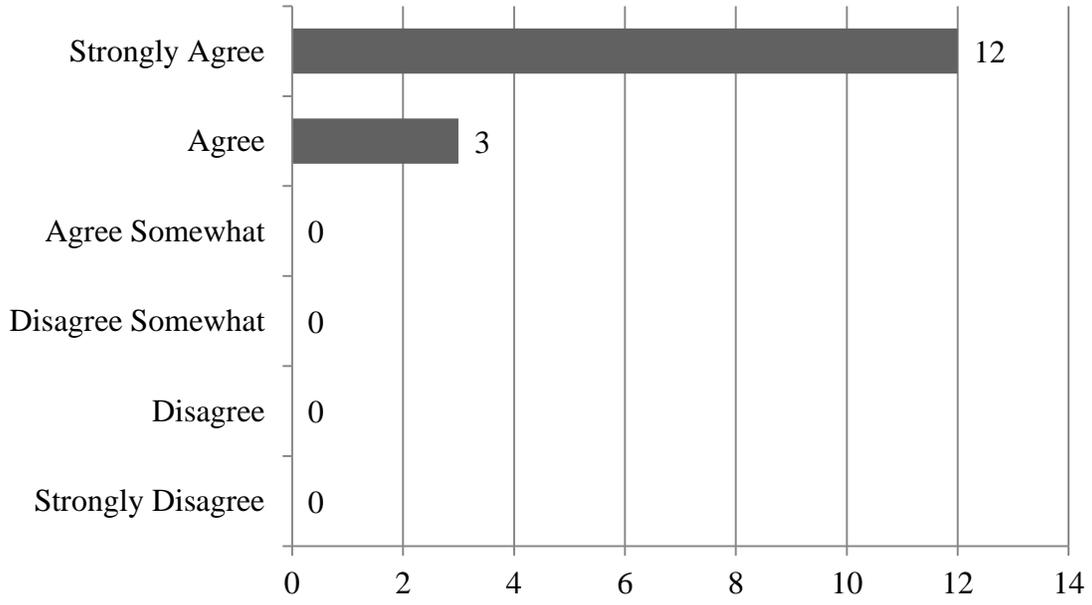


Figure A28. This leader might benefit from working side-by-side with another leader

APPENDIX 6

POST-PROJECT VIABILITY RESPONSES

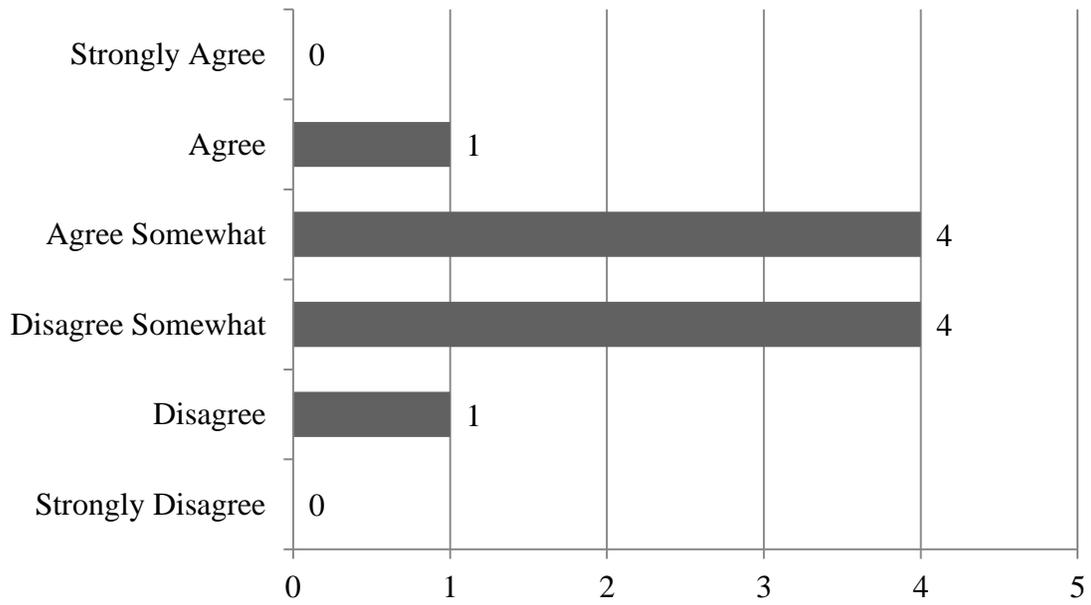


Figure A29. There are better discipleship training programs than sermon application groups

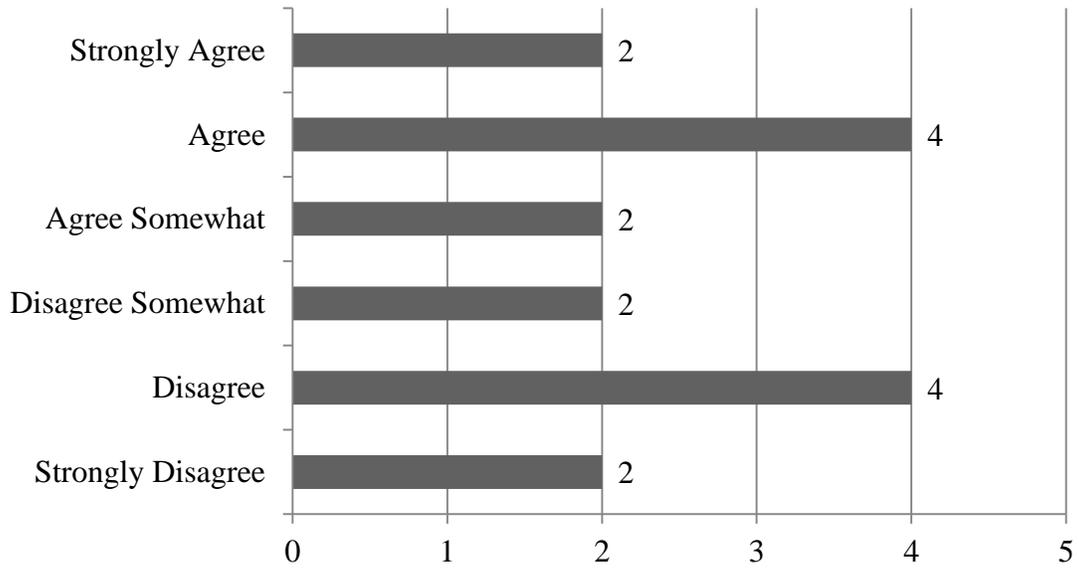


Figure A30. Our church should continue to explore other discipleship training programs

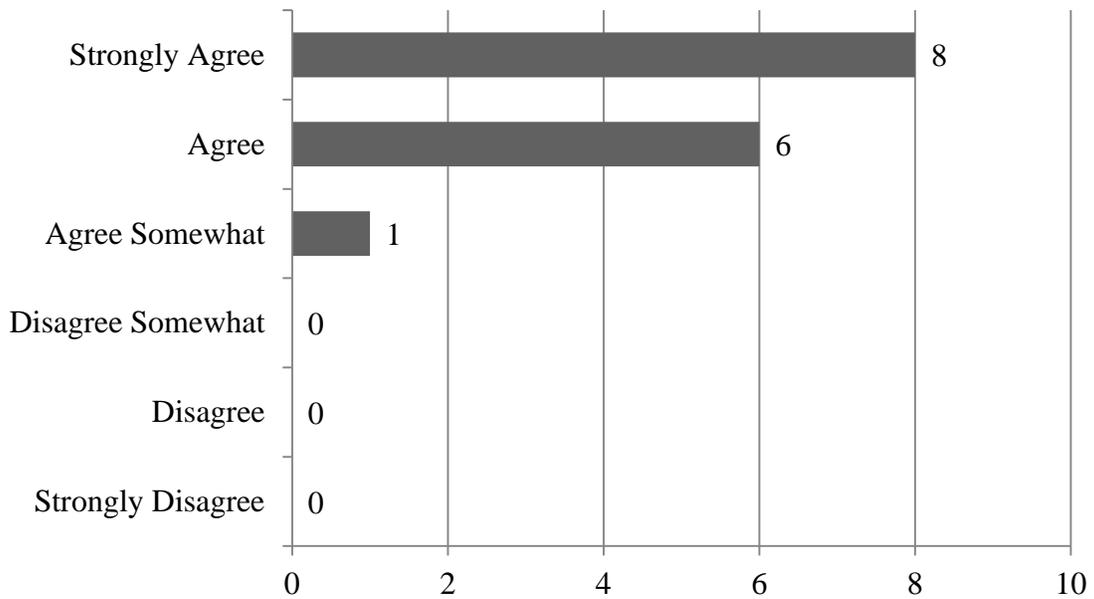


Figure A31. I personally feel that future sermon application groups could serve as a vital component of our church's discipleship ministry

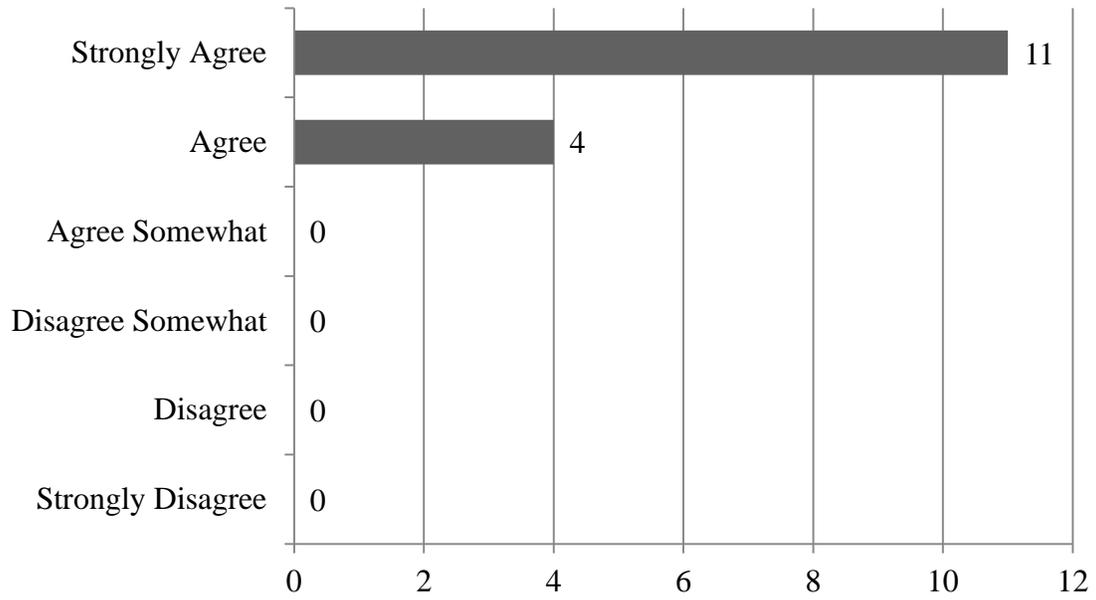


Figure A32. I personally intend to participate in future sermon application groups

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## ABSTRACT

### DEVELOPING A SERMON APPLICATION GROUP AT DUNDALK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, DUNDALK MARYLAND

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014  
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This project explores an experimental model for discipleship training at local churches. The project seeks to design a program that can assist the local church pastor in teaching the members of his congregation how to apply sermon content to their unique life circumstances. Chapter 1 presents the purpose, goals, context, rationale, definitions, and limitation of the project.

Chapter 2 discusses the biblical and theological perspectives on developing a sermon application group. This chapter offers Old and New Testament perspectives on the importance of sermon application, as well as, how Jesus used a small group model to teach his disciples how to apply the biblical principles he taught in his sermons.

Chapter 3 explores contemporary ideas in sermon application. This chapter delves into the various concepts contemporary pastors have used to help their congregations contextualize biblical principles.

Chapter 4 analyzes the three phases of the “Sermon Application Group” project. The chapter includes analysis of the eleven-week preaching series, as well as group leader training.

Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the project’s goals, methodology, strengths and weaknesses, as well as considerations for improving the project for future use.

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Diploma, Marysville-Pilchuck High School, Marysville, Washington, 1982

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